

Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 5

Mai Mochizuki

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Holmes of Kyoto

A Book Club Party
and a Spring Storm

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Mai Mochizuki

Aoi Mashiro

Age 17. She is a second-year high school student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura. Now Kiyotaka is teaching her about art and antiques.



Kiyotaka Yagashira

Age 23. He is a first-year graduate student at Kyoto University. Nicknamed "Holmes," he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. His grandfather is the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district. Sometimes he acts like your typical mischievous, "wicked" Kyoto boy.



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Chapter 1: A Spring Love Letter

1

It was March 25th and we were outside of Kyoto City, on the Kyoto Jukan Expressway between the town of Kyotamba and the city of Fukuchiyama. Since it was spring break, the highway was busy, but not to the point of jamming up. The car sped northwards.

I, Aoi Mashiro, was sitting in the second row of a large van that could easily fit eight adults. I casually looked at the driver's seat, where Kiyotaka Yagashira, nicknamed Holmes, had his hands on the wheel. Holmes is the grandson and apprentice of Seiji Yagashira, the nationally certified appraiser who owns the antique store Kura where I work part-time. He's a grad student with an exceptional observing eye and a knack for appraisal. His nickname comes from the fact that his surname has the character for "home" in it.

"If you're tired of driving, I'll switch with you, Kiyotaka," said the person in the passenger seat—Holmes's father, Takeshi Yagashira. We call him "Manager," but his main profession is writing historical novels.

"Thank you, but I'm fine. Everyone, please let me know if you want to use the restroom or take a break." Holmes smiled gently at us through the rearview mirror.

"Okay, but I'm still good." I nodded.

"I-I'm fine too," said my friend who was sitting beside me. Her name is Kaori Miyashita, and we go to the same high school.

And behind us, in the third row...

"Gotcha. I can drive too, so you can ask me to swap in anytime, Holmes!" hollered Akihito Kajiware, an up-and-coming actor with various ties to Kura.

"It's all right... I appreciate the offer," Holmes answered calmly, without looking back.

"A-Aoi, traveling with these people is kind of nerve-racking," Kaori said quietly, tugging on my sleeve.

There were five people in the car: Holmes, the manager, Kaori, Akihito, and me. An unexpected turn of events had led to this group going on a trip this spring break. Originally, it was only going to be me and Kaori going on a short trip to northern Kansai. *Now I feel bad that it turned into such a big group.*

"S-Sorry, this kind of blew up," I whispered to her.

“No, that’s not what I mean!” She shook her head vigorously. “I’m happy about this. I’m a decent fan of Akihito, and Holmes is kind of scary but he’s still hot.” She had to keep her voice low, but her clenched fists gave away her excitement.

I’m sure she’s not exaggerating when she says she’s a fan. Akihito is a rising star with good looks and a fearless attitude. It’s hard to dislike him because his naivete makes up for the arrogant things he says, and that personality seems to be popular with the public. So even though she’s only a “decent” fan, she’s not going to complain about going on a private trip with a handsome actor she likes. Oh, and although she’s quite the fangirl, she doesn’t seem to be comfortable around Holmes because he’s too perceptive. Anyway, I’m glad she’s happy even though our private getaway turned into a crowd.

Feeling content, I looked out the window at the quiet countryside. The dazzling greenery and the newly blooming cherry blossoms made for a beautiful sight. Even though we were still in Kyoto Prefecture, the spacious scenery had a completely different atmosphere from the capital to the south.

Our first stop was Amanohashidate, so we were heading for the city of Miyazu. After that, the plan was to do some sightseeing and end up at the Kinosaki hot spring, where we’d be staying at a traditional inn. *As for why this specific group is traveling together...the story goes back to last December.*

2

On New Year’s Eve, the Yagashira family held a party with an extravagant buffet and a treasure-hunting game where Ensho barged in and caused a fuss. But before that mess, when everyone was enjoying their meal, I was approached by Shigetoshi Yanagihara, an appraiser who was an old friend of the owner.

“Long time no see, Miss,” he greeted.

“Hello, Yanagihara. The last time we met was at your birthday party, right?” I bowed, slightly nervous. Last fall, I attended his eightieth birthday with Holmes and Akihito.

“Mmhm. You were really something, getting all of the questions right.”

“N-No, it was just a fluke.” I shook my head, flustered. At the party, the guests played an “authenticity game” where we guessed whether antiques were real or fake. I managed to win that game, but I’m pretty sure it was just luck. Despite that, sometimes people praise me like this, and the undeserved compliments make me feel awkward and embarrassed.

“You can’t call that a fluke. Trust me, you were special. People

asked me afterwards who you were, and I said you were Kiyotaka's girlfriend." He grinned mischievously.

I instantly looked up upon hearing that. "N-No, like I said, I'm just a part-timer. There's nothing between us," I desperately denied. A lot of people mistook Holmes and me for a couple back then, and I was afraid that the misunderstandings would make things awkward between us.

Yanagihara blinked in surprise at my reaction. "Ah, sorry. You'd hate to have rumors go around about you and a guy you're not interested in, right?"

"I-I wouldn't go as far as calling it *hate*..." I said feebly, averting my gaze—only to catch Holmes in the corner of my eye. His forced smile suggested that he heard our conversation. *Maybe he's tired of us being mistaken for a couple too.* My anxiety grew. He definitely wasn't "a guy I'm not interested in." It was actually the opposite—back then, I had a vague suspicion that I was attracted to him, but I couldn't acknowledge it because I was afraid of what I might lose.

Perhaps Yanagihara noticed my discomfort, because he quickly changed the topic: "Oh right, did you use the Tsukimiya vouchers that you won at the authenticity game?"

"Oh, no." I shook my head, coming back to my senses. The prize for winning the game was a pair of vouchers for an inn at the Kinosaki hot springs. It was a high-class establishment called Tsukimiya, and apparently Yanagihara had supervised the interior design.

"I haven't gone yet," I continued. "I wanted to go with my friend from school, so we were thinking of going during winter break, but..." The friend was Kaori Miyashita, whose family owned a long-established kimono fabrics store. We weren't in the same class at school but became friends after Holmes and I got involved in the Saio-dai incident. She's quite pretty and looks intellectual and calm, but she actually has a cute, fangirly side too. *I think we could be considered best friends now, but since my previous "best friend" betrayed me, I don't want to use that term. "The friend I get along the best with" is a better fit.*

"Time passed before I knew it, and I couldn't make a reservation...so I'm thinking spring break instead." I slumped my shoulders, trying to recall what the expiry date on the vouchers was.

"Ah. Spring is still a ways off, but since it's the cherry blossom season, you'll have to make a reservation soon or they'll be fully booked."

"O-Oh, you're right."

"Now that you mention it, I'll be staying there soon. Do you want me to book it for you while I'm there? What dates do you want? I think late March will be easier to get than April."

"W-Wait... Let me ask Kaori—my friend." I hurriedly took out my

phone.

Akihito, who was standing nearby, peeked over. "Hey, is Kaori that girl from the fabrics store?"

"Oh, yes." *Come to think of it, Akihito met her before at the owner's birthday party.*

"Staying a night in Kinosaki in the spring, huh? That sounds really nice. You know what, I think I'll go too. Yanagihara, do you think you can book an extra room?"

Huh?

"It's still early, so it should be possible to get two rooms," Yanagihara answered.

"All right then, let's go together, Aoi."

"R-Really? Don't you have work?" I asked.

"Yeah, recently there've been talks about expanding the program beyond Kyoto City, so I wanted to check Kinosaki out anyway. If I tell my manager it's for work, he'll probably free up my schedule. It's win-win—I'd have more fun going there with girls, and you two will be able to get there easier by car. I can drive us. See?" He leaned forward.

I didn't know what to say. *The ride would be appreciated, and he'd be staying in a different room, so no issues there. Kaori's a responsible person, but she has a fangirly side, so she might be happy to have Akihito with us... But a trip with me, Kaori, and Akihito? It just seems weird, I thought, casting my eyes down.*

"That would be dangerous in so many ways," Holmes said, coming over to us. He put his hands on his hips and looked exasperated.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine," Akihito insisted.

"How on earth would it be fine?"

"Wouldn't it be more dangerous for two cute high school girls to travel by themselves? I'll just be keeping an eye on them so that nothing bad happens."

"I...don't think you're mature enough for that. Besides, I'm saying that *you're* the danger."

"Wow, rude! I'm a celebrity, you know? My agency's warned me about getting involved with minors enough times to make my ears fall off. 'Sides, if you're so worried, you can just come with us." Akihito grinned. His face made me think that that was his plan when he first suggested tagging along. *Huh, so he's a schemer too.*

Holmes sighed, realizing what Akihito was up to. He nodded. "Fine. I'll come too, then."

"Huh? You will?" I asked, surprised.

"Certainly... Assuming it's not a problem for you and Kaori." Holmes smiled weakly.

"Of course not." I shook my head. "We'd feel safer having you

with us... Th-Thanks," I squeaked, delighted.

"All right, Holmes acquired!" Akihito pumped his fist.

"Acquired..." Holmes shrugged. "However, this would make our group two of each gender, which may seem suspicious to outsiders. Aoi and Kaori's parents would be concerned, and it wouldn't be good for Akihito either, as a celebrity..." he mumbled, crossing his arms. Then, he turned around and looked at the manager. "Oh, I know. Dad, would you be able to come with us as a chaperone?"

The manager blinked in surprise at the sudden request, but he quickly smiled and nodded. "Kinosaki is a nice place, and I like staying at Tsukimiya too. You're right that with a group of four young men and women, their parents will feel better if I'm with you. I'd be delighted to come. We can ask the owner to watch the store for once."

"Nice, we won't have to worry about misunderstandings then," Akihito said. "That makes five of us, huh? I'll borrow my family's van."

"Thank you, but I'll do the driving," Holmes said. "I won't be able to trust you at the wheel."

"What?! I'll have you know that I'm at least confident in my driving. I even wanna get a Class A racing license someday!"

"That's exactly where my apprehension comes from. And by 'at least,' do you mean that you aren't confident in other things?"

"No!" Akihito exclaimed, face bright red.

Everyone burst out laughing.

After that, I checked with Kaori and my parents before asking Yanagihara to make the reservations. He was able to get us rooms for March 25th, right at the start of spring break.

3

Back to the present. We had three rooms booked: one for me and Kaori, one for Holmes and Akihito, and one for the manager by himself, so that he could focus on his writing. The vague promise I'd made with Kaori to go to Kinosaki sometime had transformed into a five-person trip.

"It really is a coincidence that the inn ended up being Tsukimiya, though," Kaori said with a laugh, looking out the window.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Huh? How so?" Akihito poked his head at us from the back seat.

Kaori blushed and looked down. *She must be nervous because he suddenly came so close.* She elbowed me, prompting me to answer in her stead.

"Umm, Tsukimiya has a long relationship with the fabric store that Kaori's family owns, and her older sister is actually working there

right now to get life experience,” I said. Kaori’s sister, Saori, was the heir to the family business. Being tied to the store right after graduating from school would make her worldview too narrow, so she was working and training at Tsukimiya. That said, it was a surprise that the inn Yanagihara frequented would have close ties to Kaori’s family. *It really is a small world. I guess these kinds of connections are common among Kyoto’s old stores.*

Holmes seemed more surprised than Akihito. “Saori’s at Tsukimiya? She’s still in university, right?”

“Y-Yes. She’s only working there during spring break,” Kaori answered stiffly.

“Huh,” Akihito murmured, craning his neck to look at the driver’s seat. “Hey, Holmes. Do you know Kaori’s big sister?”

“Yes, I suppose. Actually, you should know her too. She was last year’s Saio-dai.”

“Oh!” Akihito clapped his hands together. “That gorgeous Saio-dai?! Oh yeah, they did say she was from Miyashita Kimono Fabrics.”

The Saio-dai is the star of the Aoi Festival, and in Kyoto, the title is synonymous with a woman gifted with both intelligence and beauty. Saori was chosen to be last year’s Saio-dai, and she became instantly famous for her looks.

“She was a real angel, huh?” Akihito continued. “Now I’m even more excited to go to that inn.” He clasped his hands behind his head and hummed a tune.

He’s really not hiding it. I smiled wryly. Holmes might secretly be happy about it too, though... I cast my eyes down, feeling a bit uneasy.

“Aoi?” Holmes called, bringing me back to my senses.

I looked up and said, “Oh, sorry, I was spacing out. What did you say?”

“It wasn’t anything important. I was just wondering if you’ve been to Amanohashidate before.” He smiled at me in the rearview mirror.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve seen it on TV a lot, though.” *It’s one of the Three Most Scenic Spots of Japan, so it often gets featured on travel shows. Since I’ve seen it so much, it feels as familiar as if I’ve been there before...*

“Huh? You haven’t been to Amanohashidate?” Kaori’s eyes widened.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “What about you?”

“I’ve gone there a few times. It’s been years, though.”

“Same here,” Akihito said, poking his head at us from the backseat again. “The last time was in elementary school.”

Kaori blushed, looked down, and muttered, “Th-This is bad for my heart. It’s safer to admire hot guys from a distance.” She gave a strained smile and leaned towards me. “I’m surprised you can stay calm. Akihito and Holmes are both super attractive.”

I looked at Holmes, who was sitting in the driver's seat, then back at Akihito, who was sitting behind us. Their types were different, but they were both blindingly handsome men. I was nervous around them at first, but now...

"Umm, I think you'll get used to them soon," I said quietly.

Kaori chuckled and said, "Yeah, that sounds convincing coming from you."

The city of Miyazu was two and a half hours out from Kyoto City. We parked near Amanohashidate and got out of the car.

"This way," Holmes said, taking the lead.

"Okay!" We nodded and started after him like kindergarteners following their teacher.

When we reached the cable car platform, Holmes turned around and asked, "We can either take the cable car or the lift to the summit. Which would you prefer?"

I craned my neck to look at the prices and saw that they were the same. "Cable car or lift... Which do you think is better, Kaori?"

"Hmm, last time I came here, I took the cable car with my family. I don't know which is better, though. Holmes, what do you think?"

"Let's see... Personally, I recommend the lift. It's not too scary, and it has an excellent view."

"Let's go with that then," we all agreed without hesitation.

"All right."

We headed to the lift boarding area. Kaori and I got on first, followed by Holmes, Akihito, and the manager. It was a chair-style lift—the kind you see at ski resorts. Each chair only seated one person, so we had to sit individually. Not used to it, I clumsily got on and gripped the handrail tightly.

The lift slowly ascended diagonally. Holmes was right—it wasn't too far off the ground, so it wasn't scary. The sky was clear and the wind ruffling my hair felt great. *I'm glad we picked the lift.*

"Aoi, Kaori, please look at the scenery behind you," Holmes said from behind us.

"Huh?" We turned around and were immediately faced with the bright blue sea and sky, backed by mountains.

"W-Wow, it's so pretty!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah!" Kaori said.

I gazed at the scenery behind us, holding the handrail firmly. It was then that I noticed Holmes watching us with a gentle smile. Suddenly feeling embarrassed, I faced forward. It was only recently that I admitted to myself that I had a crush on Holmes. The truth was that I'd always been attracted to him, but I desperately tried to deceive myself into thinking otherwise. I finally came to terms with it

about two weeks ago. Now that I acknowledged my feelings, just making eye contact with him was enough to make me blush and cause my heart to beat faster. I always turned away immediately, embarrassed that my face was probably as red as a lobster. *I'm being rude like this, right? What if I'm offending him?* I sighed sadly.

Before long, we reached the summit and got off the lift. We headed for the observation deck, where we'd be able to get a sweeping view of Amanohashidate.

"It's over there, Aoi," Kaori said, pointing at the sign while walking at a quick pace.

"Okay." I nodded.

Kaori, Akihito, and I jogged up to the observation deck and stopped. "Whoa!" we exclaimed in wonder at the sprawling scenery. I knew what Amanohashidate looked like from TV, and I was sure it'd be the same thing in real life...but I was wrong. Actually laying my eyes on it was exciting beyond belief, leaving me breathless. The sea, separated in half by a row of pine trees, sparkled with a blinding light. The green land bridge is called Hiriyukan—"view of the flying dragon"—because it's likened to a dragon flying up into the sky. *It really does look like a dragon's back.* The contrast between the blue sea, green bridge, and bright sun was beautiful—divine, even. It gripped at my heartstrings. Amanohashidate—"Heaven's Bridge." Its beauty rendered me speechless for some time.

"Man, I didn't feel much when I came here as a kid, but seeing it now, it's amazing," Akihito said passionately.

Kaori nodded. "It really is."

"I didn't think I'd be this impressed either," I murmured.

"Indeed," said Holmes and the manager.

"It's worthy of being one of the Three Most Scenic Spots of Japan," continued Holmes. *It absolutely is.*

"This is definitely something you should see in person instead of on TV," I said, gazing at the scenery. "I'm glad I came to Amanohashidate." I clenched my fist in front of my chest. If Kaori and I had gone to the Kinohara hot spring by ourselves, we wouldn't have stopped by here. *I'm glad I got to see this view.*

"It's good that they're all enjoying it, Kiyotaka," the manager said, placing his hand on Holmes's shoulder.

"Yes." Holmes nodded, smiling warmly.

"Huh," Kaori murmured, looking at the two. "I didn't think Holmes and the manager resembled each other at all, but they've got the same aura, huh?"

"I think so too," I said.

"The manager seems safer, though," she continued in a quiet voice. "No thorns or poison."

“Yeah, I think so too.” I giggled.

Akihito ran up to us excitedly and said, “Hey, let’s do the upside-down view!” *That’s a way to view Amanohashidate by turning your back to it, spreading your legs apart, bending over, and looking at it upside down from between your legs. It’s supposed to make it look like a floating bridge to heaven.*

Even though Kaori and I weren’t wearing skirts, we were still reluctant to do it. We looked at each other and smiled awkwardly.

“It really looks like a bridge to heaven, I swear,” Akihito insisted with glimmering eyes. He did the upside-down view with innocent glee, not caring about his age. *That naivete is probably the secret to his popularity.*

Next to him, Holmes did the upside-down view as well, making me and Kaori cough in shock.

“E-Even Holmes is doing it,” Kaori squeaked, bewildered.

Holmes got back up and nodded. “Yes, I make sure to do all the local customs.” He smiled and placed his hand on his chest. I almost laughed at the contrast between his elegant smile and the upside-down position he’d just assumed. But on the other hand, I also thought, *That side of him is great too.* Embarrassed at how blatantly in love I was, I turned away to hide my burning cheeks.

“A-Ah, you’re Akihito Kajiwara...right?” exclaimed a nearby woman.

Akihito hesitated for a moment before turning around with a smile and saying, “Yes?” He ran his hand through his bangs and I smiled stiffly at the exaggerated gesture.

The woman on the other hand blushed and said, “C-Can I shake your hand?” She timidly held out her hand.

“Hey, don’t be such a fangirl,” said a man behind her who seemed to be her boyfriend. He glared at the exchange.

The woman pouted and turned around. “B-But it’s *Akihito Kajiwara!* I want to shake his hand.”

Akihito grinned. “Sure, a handshake’s no problem.” He held out his hand with a cheeky smile.

“Th-Thank you!” The woman took his hand and bowed over and over, blushing furiously.

“C’mon, let’s go,” her boyfriend said bluntly, starting to walk away.

“Ah, okay.” She bowed to Akihito again and hurriedly ran after her boyfriend.

“Don’t suck up to a ham actor like that who only has his looks going for him,” he said. It was probably out of jealousy, but Kaori and I were still shocked at his harsh words.

It’s true that Akihito can’t really be called a talented actor, but I can’t

believe he'd say that when Akihito is the one who cheerfully accepted a sudden handshake request during his private time. I nervously looked at Akihito to see how he was taking it.

"Oh jeez, he said I only have my looks going for me. Even men acknowledge that I'm good-looking!" He smiled happily.

Kaori and I gaped at him.

"A-Akihito, aren't you upset?" Kaori asked.

"Yeah," I said. "He was so rude."

"Oh, nah." Akihito folded his hands behind his head. "I was annoyed, but it's true that I'm a ham actor. I can't really complain when people call me out on that," he said nonchalantly.

Kaori and I didn't know what to say.

Holmes, who'd been listening from behind us, nodded and said, "Indeed, you are a ham actor."

"Dude, don't hit me when I'm down!"

"But you're great at monkey see, monkey do," Holmes immediately continued.

"What?! That's even worse!"

"No, I'm complimenting you. You just need to incorporate that monkey imitation into your normal acting."

"Huh?" Akihito's eyes widened.

"Imitate the acting of an actor who fits the role. It'll be much faster than trying to polish your own acting with your lack of skill, right? Ukiyo-e artists frantically polished their skills by copying their masters. Their paintings start out as mere imitations, but before long, they can stand on their own."

Akihito stood there wordlessly, taking in Holmes's advice.

Next to them, the manager nodded and said, "Yes, I agree. You and Kiyotaka have completely different personalities, but you were able to imitate him to such a great extent. You should leverage that ability in your acting."

"O-Oh yeah? Come to think of it, I was always good at imitating my classmates and teachers. So I just have to apply that to my acting, huh?" Akihito clenched his fist and put a hand on Holmes's shoulder. "Thanks, man. You really are my heart's mentor."

Holmes gently pried Akihito's hand off of his shoulder and said, "No, I didn't do anything worthy of thanks, and I'd like to resign from being your mentor."

"There you go again, saying that." Akihito laughed and smacked Holmes's arm.

"Anyway... Shall we go for lunch?" Holmes asked, rubbing his arm.

"Okay!" we answered enthusiastically.

We went to a small seafood restaurant near Amanohashidate and had lunch in one of their private rooms.

When we finished eating, Holmes, holding his teacup, said, “We have time to go to Kono Shrine after this, if you’d like.”

“Kono Shrine?” Akihito and I asked in unison. Kaori and the manager looked like they thought it was a good idea.

“Is it famous?” Akihito tilted his head.

“That’s a good question,” Holmes replied. “It could be considered famous, but it’s also quite niche. It’s called the ‘original’ Ise Shrine.”

“Do you mean the Ise Grand Shrine?” I asked, leaning forward. The Ise Grand Shrine in Mie Prefecture was the most famous shrine in Japan. I’d gone there once with my grandparents, but unfortunately, I was too young to remember anything.

“Yes. Amaterasu-Omikami and Toyouke-no-Okami, the goddesses who reside at Ise Grand Shrine, moved there from Kono Shrine. It’s the only grand shrine in the San’indo region, and it boasts the highest shrine rank and a great history,” Holmes explained as usual.

“That means it’s an incredible shrine, right?” Akihito asked.

“Yes, it is. I also recommend the nearby Manai Shrine. Since we’re already here, shall we pay them a visit?” Holmes smiled.

“Okay,” we all said enthusiastically, again.

After our meal, we got back in the car and headed for Kono Shrine, a.k.a. the original Ise Shrine. Its cypress bark roof gave it a historical flair, and its form felt dignified. I let out an impressed murmur as we looked at it from a distance.

“Just like Ise Shrine, this shrine has plain wood *torii* gates,” Holmes said, washing his hands in the cleansing basin and lightly rinsing his mouth with it. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief.

“Plain wood?” I asked, looking up at the archway again. I usually imagined *torii* gates to be vermilion, but the one here wasn’t painted any color. It was its original wooden color. *Now that he mentions it, I think Ise Grand Shrine’s gates were also plain wood like this one.* “That’s what this is called?”

“Yes, and this shrine also has the five colored *suetama*, which are only allowed to be enshrined at Ise Grand Shrine and Kono Shrine.”

“What’s that?” Akihito asked without delay.

“They’re five colored balls: blue, red, yellow, white, and black, representing the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These are considered the five great elements that make up the universe.”

“Huh, I don’t really get it, but that’s cool,” Akihito said blankly.

Kaori and the manager chuckled.

“Let’s pay our respects,” Holmes said.

We stood in a row before the main building, paid our offerings, bowed twice, clapped twice, then bowed again. I gave my thanks and looked back up.

“Oh, there’s the five colored *suetama*,” Holmes said, looking at the fence around the main building. The five colored balls were more vivid and beautiful than I’d imagined.

“They’re so pretty,” I said without thinking.

Kaori nodded beside me. “Yeah, I never paid that much attention to them before, but they’re really colorful.”

“Feels like we’re seeing something precious, since they can only be found here and at Ise,” Akihito remarked.

“Lucky us!” Kaori said.

Holmes and the manager watched over us with cheerful eyes as we admired the five colored balls. *That father and son really do resemble each other.*

“Now then, let’s visit Manai Shrine, which is just next door,” Holmes said. “That said, it’s about five hundred meters from here.”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Akihito replied. “We can walk. It’ll be good exercise.”

“Let’s do that, then,” we agreed.

“This way,” Holmes said, and we followed him towards Manai Shrine.

“Th-This is surprisingly exhausting,” I said, wiping the sweat from my forehead as I walked. Even though it was the end of March, the sun felt like early summer. It was also a rather steep slope, and I was feeling a bit out of breath.

“Aoi, are you lacking in physical exercise?” Holmes chuckled, grinning mischievously.

I looked up at him, frowning angrily. “N-No, I ride my bike, and I have phys ed at school.”

“Oh, that’s right. ‘Phys ed’ has a rather nostalgic ring to it.”

“What about you, Holmes? Do you exercise?”

“I do a lot of walking. If time allows, I’ll walk from home to university and from university to the store without a problem.”

“O-Oh. The store is pretty far from your university, right?”

“About four kilometers? It goes by fast when I’m thinking.”

Someone like Holmes probably has a lot to think about.

“By the way, my father is good at walking too.” He turned around to look at the manager who was walking right behind us, appreciating the view. “Right?”

The manager snapped back to attention and said, “Yes, I put together stories when I’m walking like this.”

“Huh,” we all murmured, impressed.

“Oh, look, we’re already here,” Holmes said, looking towards the *torii* gate. It was a stone arch, and instead of being guarded by stone lion-dogs... “Dragons, as you can see.”

Two guardian dragons were stationed to the left and right of the gate, and there was a sign that said “No Photography.” It was very quiet, and because of the shade under the trees, it felt nice and cool. The shrine grounds seemed to blend in with the mountain. It really felt like a special holy ground, and its dignified atmosphere had me unconsciously straightening my posture.

“Doesn’t this feel like a dragon’s den?” Holmes asked.

He’s completely right—this is the home of dragons. “It does,” I said firmly.

“Yeah,” Kaori agreed.

It didn’t feel like a trendy place where you could come for fun because everyone was doing it, so I felt guilty for coming with that attitude. The atmosphere could even strike fear into one’s heart, depending on the person. *You have to come here respectfully.*

“This isn’t one of those trendy so-called energy vortexes,” Akihito said with a serious face. “There’s actual spiritual energy here.” He must’ve sensed the special atmosphere too, because even he was refraining from his usual jokes. *Since he’s an actor, he might be really sensitive to these things.*

“Amaterasu-Omikami, Izanagi, and Izanami are worshipped here, and Toyouke-no-Okami is worshipped in the inner dwelling. In other words, this shrine is dedicated to the creators of Japan, Izanagi and Izanami, as well as the main deities of Ise Grand Shrine. This place has also been used for rituals since ancient times, making it a true holy land,” Holmes explained quietly, staring at the shrine grounds.

I gulped. *It’s that important of a place.* Being the unsophisticated person that I was, I couldn’t help but be awed.

“I was actually meaning to bring you all here because I wanted you to feel the special atmosphere.” Holmes smiled. “I’m glad you understood its significance.”

We all nodded silently.

I focused my thoughts, straightened my posture, and clapped my hands in prayer. I then gave my final bow with serious, sacred sentiments.

“Shall we go back to the car now?” Holmes asked.

“Okay.” We all bowed and left the shrine grounds.

“Man, that was incredible,” Akihito said.

“Yeah,” Kaori agreed.

“I’m glad we came here,” I said. “Thank you, Holmes.” I took a deep breath.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Holmes smiled happily, his eyes narrowing into arcs.

5

At last, we headed for Yanagihara’s hot spring inn of choice, Tsukimiya, which the manager frequented as well.

“Ah, there’s the hot spring district of Kinosaki,” Holmes murmured.

Everyone looked out the windows. In the center of the road were rows of cherry blossom trees surrounding a small stream. Farther down the road was a stone arch bridge. The road was lined with traditional hot spring inns standing side by side, and I could see the steam rising from them. People were walking around wearing yukata, with hand towels hanging from their necks, and I could almost hear the clacking sounds of their wooden *geta* sandals. It was a hot spring district straight out of the books—*This must be what the phrase “good old-fashioned hot spring” means.*

“Wow, what a nice atmosphere!” I remarked.

“Travel dramas get filmed here a lot,” said Kaori.

“Makes sense,” replied Akihito.

As we were looking out the windows, Holmes recited, “*Towel hanging from my neck, I go to the open-air bath in the morning, hearing the sentiments of my journey in the sound of my geta.*” He smiled at us in the mirror.

“Huh?” We all made confused faces.

The manager laughed cheerfully and said, “It’s the poem Tekkan Yosano recited when he visited Kinosaki. The scenery hasn’t changed since then, huh?”

“Who’s Tekkan Yosano?” Akihito asked, leaning forward.

Holmes answered, “He was a poet and university professor, as well as the husband of Akiko Yosano. You could say that he was the one who discovered her talent.” Akiko Yosano was one of the most famous and controversial woman poets of Japan. She was a pioneer of feminism, pacifism, and social reform.

Akihito immediately clapped his hands and said, “Akiko Yosano’s husband? The banana guy?”

Holmes grimaced and said, “Is that the only kind of knowledge you have?”

“Um, what’s this about a banana guy?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Well... Answering that question would be sexual harassment, so I will refrain from doing so,” Holmes said smoothly.

“Huh?” Kaori and I blinked.

“Anyway, Kinosaki has always been a hot spring beloved by many

authors. The scenery itself makes you think of literature.”

We slowly drove through the hot spring district.

“It’s over there,” Holmes said, as a tasteful wooden sign saying “Tsukimiya” came into view. The inn had a temple-like roofed gate called a *munamon*. There were cherry blossom trees behind it.

We parked in the parking lot outside the gate and excitedly went into the spacious grounds. There were two adjacent inn buildings.

“Two inns...?” I murmured.

“Yes,” Holmes answered. “The one in the back is the main building, which has a long history. The one in the front is the new building. The main building is a high-class inn, while the new building is a more reasonably priced, standard hot spring inn. We’ll be staying at the new building tonight.”

The new building did look more modern than the main building, but unlike most fashionable establishments, it had a formal aesthetic, reflecting the long history of the original inn.

“Welcome,” greeted the proprietress, who was standing in front of the door. She must’ve seen us parking the car. “We’ve missed you, Ijuin.” She smiled and bowed.

“Ah, sorry I haven’t visited in a while.” The manager smiled and bowed back.

Now Saori came out from the inn and bowed deeply upon seeing us. She looked just like a traditional waitress in her pink kimono and apron.

“Sis!” Kaori immediately ran to Saori.

“I’m glad you seem to be doing well, Kaori.”

“Are you doing your job properly? You aren’t causing trouble, right? You can be so spacey sometimes, so I’ve been worried.”

“Please don’t worry, I’m doing fine.”

Something felt slightly off about Saori’s words. *Oh right, she’s not speaking with a Kansai accent like she did before. Ever since she was chosen as Saio-dai, she’s been appearing in magazines and on TV. Maybe that’s why she’s trying to speak in standard Japanese. That said, her intonation is still off from how someone from Kanto would speak.*

Kaori turned to the proprietress and bowed deeply. “Long time no see, ma’am. Thank you for looking after my sister. I’m really sorry for any trouble she caused.”

Saori and the proprietress looked at each other and giggled.

“You’re as responsible as ever, Kaori,” the proprietress said. “But don’t worry. Saori is working very hard.”

“Oh, that’s a relief. Mom was really worried too. She was like, ‘What’re we going to do if Saori breaks an expensive vase?’”

“You and Mom are so mean to me.” Saori pouted, a tinge of red on her cheeks. Her appearance was both beautiful and sweet.

Somehow, she seemed much more charming than when we'd first met. *Maybe it's because she served as the Saio-dai for a year.* Her mild clumsiness only added to her charms.

"Now then, show them around, Saori," the proprietress instructed.

"Okay." Saori nodded. "Please come this way."

We followed her into the inn's spacious entrance hall, where there were slippers lined up neatly on the beautiful tatami floor. The hall was decorated with flowers, large framed pieces of calligraphy, and antique works of art. At first glance, they seemed to be arranged freely, but upon closer inspection, there was a perfect, calculated balance to their positioning. It felt like a private art museum.

"Wow," I murmured, looking around.

"I heard that Yanagihara supervised the art pieces here too," Holmes said.

Oh, no wonder they're so nice. Yanagihara's skill as an appraiser was on par with the owner's.

After the manager finished checking us in, the attendants, including Saori, led us to our rooms.

"This room is for Miss Mashiro and Miss Miyashita," Saori said, stopping in front of a door.

Kaori burst out laughing. "Miss Mashiro and Miss Miyashita? Come on, Sis."

"I'm working right now," Saori explained with a giggle. "Come in." She opened the door, revealing a large Japanese-style room. The tatami mats shone under the soft light coming from the paper lamp. The large window on the veranda side was so clear that I almost couldn't tell that there was glass there. Beautiful cherry blossom petals were falling outside.

"Wow!" Kaori and I gasped in admiration.

"The room next door is Kiyotaka and Akihito's, and the room next to theirs, at the end of the hall, is Ijuin's," Saori explained while preparing our tea. When she was done, she bowed and said, "Please enjoy your stay." Just then, I saw something sparkle around her neck. *Maybe it was a necklace?*

After Saori left the room, Kaori and I looked at each other.

"She seems to fit in here, huh?" I remarked.

"Yeah, I feel a bit better now. She's *really* clumsy at home." Kaori placed her hand on her chest, looking sincerely relieved.

"She's going to inherit Miyashita Fabrics one day, after all."

"Well, it'll actually be her husband that has to run the store."

"Oh, I see." *So her husband will be taken into the family.*

"But, like, despite her age, she's still never had a boyfriend. Mom and Dad are trying to organize marriage interviews for her."

"W-Wow, she's never had a boyfriend? Even though she's so

pretty?" I blinked in disbelief.

Kaori nodded. "She's kind of a coward."

"It might be hard for guys to approach her because she's too pretty."

"Uh, I don't know about that." Kaori shrugged. "Anyway, I can see why this inn's so famous," she said, looking around the room.

"Yeah, it's really nice. It's got a great aesthetic."

"Yep, I like the flowers in the alcove."

I looked at the cherry blossom-themed ikebana arrangement in the alcove. There was a large piece of calligraphy hanging on the wall above it.

"Huh, it's one of Naoya Shiga's proverbs," Kaori said. Naoya Shiga was a literary master who was called the "God of Stories." *Come to think of it, when we went to the Shinkokan cafe at Yoshida-Sanso Inn, Holmes quoted Naoya Shiga when he was giving advice to Kurisu Aigasa, the author.*

The proverb was: "Bury the past in the past and clear the way for a new, better future — Naoya Shiga." *There's no point in dragging out the past. What's important is what happens from here on out. Refresh your state of mind and you can create a better future.* They were very positive words.

"That's a nice quote," I said.

"Don't drag out the past, huh? Sounds like it was meant for you, Aoi."

"C-Come on, I've already stopped doing that."

"Really?"

"Y-Yeah. Anyway, let's go see Holmes's room," I said hurriedly, to prevent the conversation from veering towards relationship talk.

Kaori nodded, her eyes sparkling. "Yeah, let's. Is it the same as ours?"

"Probably."

We hurried into the hallway and saw that the door to Holmes and Akihito's room was open. A different employee was attending to them. I peeked inside the room and noticed Akihito right up against the window, looking at the scenery outside, while Holmes was giving something to the attendant. *What's that?* I craned my neck to try to get a better view, but Holmes noticed us and smiled.

"Come in, Aoi and Kaori. How was your room?"

We bowed and stepped inside. "It was the same type of room as this one," I said.

My eyes settled on the calligraphy on the wall: "Happiness is something that should be received, not sought. If you ask for something and receive it, that is pleasure, not happiness — Naoya Shiga."

"This one's Naoya Shiga too," I remarked.

"You're right," Kaori said.

"Naoya Shiga's masterpiece, *At Kinosaki*, is said to be inspired by the Kinosaki hot spring," Holmes explained.

"That makes sense," I replied. "What kind of story is it?"

"Hmm... The protagonist gets hit by a train on the Yamanote Line in Tokyo and goes to the Kinosaki hot spring to recuperate. At Kinosaki, he witnesses the life and death of various creatures such as a small insect, and reflects on how his life was spared, as well as life and death in general."

"Huh, that seems deep," I said.

"Yeah, this quote seems deep too," Kaori added.

"Oh right," I said, looking up. "Holmes, you gave that attendant something just now, right? What was it? It looked like a letter."

"Ah, that was a gratuity."

"A gratuity..." I stared at him blankly.

"It's a tip, Aoi," Akihito answered immediately.

"I-I know that much!"

Holmes folded his arms and slightly tilted his head. "In my mind, it has a slightly different connotation than a tip does."

Apparently it's normal to give gratuities to attendants at high-class inns like this. Kaori and Akihito didn't seem surprised. *Then again, Akihito's father was a famous author, and Kaori's family runs a long-standing kimono fabric store. That might be why they don't find it strange to pay gratuities at a place like this.*

"U-Um, just for future reference, how much do you pay for these gratuities?" I asked quietly.

"For future reference?" Holmes smiled in amusement. "Let's see... People usually say two thousand, three thousand, or five thousand yen. My father and grandfather give five thousand, but since I'm still a broke student, five thousand might seem to imply I'm trying to get more than my room cleaned. When the attendant left, I said, 'Please take care of us today,' and gave her an envelope with three thousand yen inside."

"O-Oh..." The information was kind of overwhelming. "Is it mandatory to give gratuities at these kinds of inns?" I asked nervously.

"Not at all." Holmes shook his head. "It's not a rule. There are also many cases where the attendant will refuse, since you're already paying a service fee."

"R-Right, that makes sense."

"However, since I grew up surrounded by old people, giving gratuities feels natural to me."

"I guess that *would* be normal for the owner, since he's a celebrity

with an old-fashioned mindset..." I murmured.

Holmes shook his head. "That's not true, Aoi."

"Huh?"

"The owner was not wealthy to begin with. But he always says, 'People don't chase money; money comes to people.' In other words, even if he doesn't have money, he believes it'll come to him eventually. If he pays gratuities, treats people to meals, and acts like a rich person, he really will become rich one day. A wealthy heart brings forth wealth. Setting aside whether it actually works or not, I'd like to be like that too." He placed his hand on his chest and smiled.

I was sincerely impressed. *So it's not about whether you're supposed to give gratuity or not—it's that wealth will come to those who have the means and the charity to do so naturally. That's what the Yagashira family believes.*

"Basically, giving gratuities is something we do so that it'll come around and bring us wealth. Blackhearted, right?" Holmes grinned mischievously.

I laughed. "Those who are kind benefit themselves."

"Exactly."

We all laughed.

"Hey, let's go to the bath, guys!" Akihito shouted, grabbing a towel.

"That's a good idea," Holmes said. "Shall we?"

"Okay."

We took the yukata and towels that had been prepared for us in our rooms and eagerly headed for the public bath.

"See you later," Holmes said when we arrived at the entrance.

Kaori and I went into the women's bath.

"This is kind of exciting, huh?" I asked.

"It's like a school trip," Kaori said.

"Yeah!"

We took off our clothes in the changing room, feeling a bit embarrassed, and took our hand towels to the washing area. After washing ourselves, we tied up our hair tightly and went to the open-air bath. It was under a gazebo, surrounded by rocks. The dim sky, the rising steam, and the faint light from the lanterns gave it a mystical feel. We passed by a group of people who were just leaving. No one else was there.

"It's empty. Lucky us, huh?" Kaori said.

"Yep."

We poured hot water over ourselves with the buckets and slowly entered the bath.

"Phew, this is nice," I said. The water was a comfortable temperature—not too hot. It felt soft against my skin. I touched my

arm. "Wow, it feels slippery."

"This hot spring is good for your skin. Once your skin's all smooth, you can use it to knock Holmes off his feet."

"Wh-What?! That's not happening." I sank down in the water up to my chin and looked down.

"How's it going between you two anyway? You already looked like a lovey-dovey couple to me when you were talking to each other in his room earlier."

"N-No, it's not like that."

"Are you going to say 'I'm drawing a line between us' again?"

"N-No, I gave up on that," I mumbled.

"Huh?" Kaori's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I finally realized how I really feel..." I continued, telling Kaori my honest feelings despite not being able to lift my face out of embarrassment. I told her about how even though I always liked him, I convinced myself that it wasn't love. About how I was finally able to come to terms with my feelings.

"I see..." Kaori said after I finished. "It's about time."

"What?"

"I knew you were lying to yourself about your feelings. It was totally obvious."

I glanced at Kaori without turning my head and blushed harder.

"R-Right. I'm ashamed of myself."

"So what're you going to do now?"

"Wh-What?"

"Are you going to tell him?"

I sighed with a heavy heart. "Holmes doesn't have a girlfriend, but apparently there's someone he wants to be in a relationship with."

"R-Really? Who's that?"

"I-I don't know."

"H-Huh. I wonder what kind of girl she is."

"She must be both beautiful and talented. He has a high sense of aesthetic, after all."

"Yeah," Kaori agreed. "But then how come they aren't going out? I doubt anyone would pass up a chance to go out with Holmes."

"I think so too. But Holmes isn't interested in romance, so I get the feeling that he might be being cautious." *I think it's only a matter of time, though.*

"So you're not going to tell him how you feel?"

"Well... I don't want to drag it out either, so I think I'll tell him. But first, I want to make a lot of memories over spring break. I'll tell him when I'm a third-year, and if he rejects me, I'll quit the job and focus on studying for entrance exams. I think I'll be able to use the power from my broken heart to fuel my studies..." I sighed.

Kaori nodded. We sat there quietly for some time, until suddenly we heard a young woman giggling nearby. Surprised, we looked to see who it was.

“S-Sorry, I happened to overhear,” said Saori.

Kaori and I widened our eyes.

“Saori?”

“Why’re you slacking off, Sis?”

“I-I’m not slacking. My shift today was only until 5 p.m. The proprietress said, ‘Go take a bath with your sister, since she came all this way.’” Saori shrugged.

“Fine, but Aoi was serious. You shouldn’t be laughing.”

“S-Sorry. I was laughing because of Aoi’s optimism.”

“Optimism?” I stared blankly at Saori.

“Confessing your feelings without any expectations, and if you get rejected, you’ll quit your job and redirect the power of a broken heart into your entrance exams... It’s like no matter what happens, you’ll still be moving forward. If it were me, I’d probably think my life was over after a broken heart. I can’t imagine redirecting that energy somewhere else. I think you’re optimistic, Aoi, and you have a firm footing.”

“Yep,” Kaori agreed. “Aoi’s a forward thinker, and she’s responsible, like, in a calm way.”

“N-No, that’s not true. You’re the responsible one, Kaori.”

“But I think you’re the calm one.”

“Am I...?” I tilted my head. *No one’s ever called me that before. Maybe I’ve changed since working at Kura. Spending time with people like Holmes and the manager every day, surrounded by antiques... Did their calmness rub off on me?*

“You two really are best friends, huh?” Saori said, smiling at us.

Best friends... I’ve been avoiding those words ever since the drama with my ex-friend. But hearing Saori say that and seeing Kaori smiling happily at me makes my chest feel warm. Maybe I wasn’t avoiding those words—maybe I was just scared of them. Scared that I was the only one who thought we were best friends... But now that it’s been said, it feels like our best friend status has been recognized, I thought happily.

“You’re lucky that you get to stay close, Aoi,” Saori murmured, looking up at the sky. It didn’t seem like Kaori heard her, but I definitely did. *What does that mean? Saori broke ties with her friends in the past, so is she jealous that I have a best friend? No, if that were the case, she’d say it to both of us, not just me.*

Suddenly, I remembered something that Kaori once said: “My sister’s obsessed with Holmes since she thinks he’s cool, but...” *Come to think of it, Saori complimented him in the past too. I thought she was just a fan, but what if she really does have a crush on him? Wouldn’t she*

be jealous of me since I can be with him all the time, even though it's just for work?

I stared at Saori's beautiful face, feeling uneasy.



"Man, women really like taking long baths, huh?" I, Akihito Kajiware, said. Holmes and I hadn't stayed in the bath for long before leaving and changing into yukata. I plunked myself down on a couch in the lobby and opened a can of beer. I was actually on my second can, but there was still no sign of Aoi and Kaori coming out. I took a swig of the beer.

Holmes looked at me a bit coldly and sighed. "It's your baths that are too short."

"But it's so hot in there. Don't you feel uncomfortable after a while?"

"You're free to feel however you want, but don't drag me with you. Was there a need to use so much force?" He sipped his beer with an exasperated look.

When we were in the public bath, I said, "Let's get outta here," grabbed his hand, and basically forced him to leave with me.

"We came as a group, so there's no fun in being alone, right? You can go in by yourself later and take your time," I said. Then I looked straight at Holmes. "Hey, this is a good opportunity to talk man-to-man."

"No thanks," Holmes replied immediately.

I just about choked on my beer. "Can't you be a little nicer?"

"I have a bad feeling about your 'man-to-man' talking. If you want to talk, make it about work."

"Who wants to talk about work on their day off?! Have some tact, man."

"Well... You have a point there."

"So let's talk man-to-man."

"Fine..." Holmes shrugged, seeming to have given up.

"Aren't you gonna go out with Aoi?" I asked directly.

Holmes frowned. "And you tell *me* to have tact?"

"I mean, it totally feels like you guys could get together right now. Why don't you?"

Holmes sighed, seeming sincerely exasperated. "What on earth is wrong with you?"

"Wait, what?"

"She's still in high school."

"Yeah, I know."

"Even if I *did* have deeper feelings for her, she's only seventeen. That's a crime," Holmes said flatly.

I gaped at him. "A-A crime?"

"Yes, it's undeniably sexual misconduct."

"Wh-What?! Well, it's true, every time I show up at my agency, they tell me, 'We're not going to try too hard to control your relationships, but make *sure* they're at least eighteen, or else we're going to have problems.' But..."

"Isn't every time excessive?"

"I think so too. But as I was going to say, they tell me that because I'm a celebrity. Normal adults going out with high schoolers isn't anything new, right? Obviously compensated dating is a crime, but there's no law that says you can't have a real relationship, right?" I insisted.

"Indeed." Holmes nodded. "When an adult man dates a seventeen-year-old, even if they become intimate, it apparently isn't considered a crime if they say they're in a real relationship and it's not just about satisfying sexual desire. Thus, if I were to date a seventeen-year-old girl and things eventually got to that point, as long as there's an emotional connection, it won't be considered a crime."

"O-Oh, so it's fine, right?" *Half of that went over my head, but the point is that it's not a crime, right? So it's fine.*

"But during an investigation, one would have to say, 'The sexual act was not merely to satisfy my own sexual desire,' and I'm not sure how true that can be. No matter how nicely you word it, by nature, aren't those acts for the purpose of satisfying one's sexual desire?" Holmes asked with a serious face.

I was lost for words. *Is he really thinking about that? Like, is there anything he doesn't analyze? Okay, but seriously...* "D-Dude, you think too much for your own good."

"I'm aware," he responded solemnly.

Oh, so he knows. Wait, but still... "Okay, but in that case, you just have to not do those things until she's eighteen, right?"

"Yes, of course. However, the act of dating is a dangerous rationalization."

"A-A dangerous rationalization?"

"Yes."

"What's a rationalization again?"

"To put it simply...it's a way to justify a wrongdoing."

"Oh, I see. If you go out, then it ends up being like, 'We love each other, so we can do anything!'"

"I didn't mean it in such a crude way." Holmes facepalmed.

"Huh? That's not it?"

"Well... You're not completely wrong." He hung his head.

"You really do think too much, man."

"Like I said, I'm aware."

“Okay, so anyway, what’s the rationalization?”

“Well, the point is that it’s easier to hold back when it doesn’t reach the point of being in a relationship in the first place.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense.”

“That’s why I at least...” He had a faraway look in his eyes.

“At least what?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing. So what about you?”

“I’m always in love with someone,” I declared, clenching my fist.

“That’s just like you.” Holmes smiled, seeming pleased with my answer.



“That was a nice long bath, huh?” I said.

“Yep. The water felt good,” said Kaori.

We exited the changing room with our hair in ponytails, wearing the yukata provided by the inn. We looked at each other and laughed awkwardly as we walked. When we reached the lobby, we saw Holmes and Akihito sitting on a couch and talking cheerfully, beers in hand. The two of them in hot spring yukata made for a picturesque sight.

“Holmes and Akihito really get along well, huh?” Kaori commented, gripping the towel around her neck.

“What? U-Um, kind of, I guess.” I nodded skeptically.

“They make a perfect picture in their yukata.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” I giggled and noticed the four beer cans on the table. *Did we make them wait a long time?* I worried as we walked up to them. “W-We’re here. Sorry, we must’ve kept you waiting for a long time.”

“Yeah, you did.” Akihito nodded without hesitation.

Holmes glared at him and said, “We were enjoying some beer after getting out of the bath.” He looked up and froze upon seeing me.

“Um, is something wrong?” I checked my collar, wondering if I’d worn my yukata backwards again.

“No, I was just thinking that the yukata suits you very well. You both look lovely.” He smiled softly.

“Th-Thanks,” Kaori and I said in unison, blushing and looking down.

“Oh no,” Kaori whispered. “Holmes is scary, but hearing him say that makes my heart flutter. It’s not fair.”

“I-I know, right?” I nodded.

“Now then, it’s just about time for dinner,” Holmes said. “Shall we go? They prepared a separate room for us.”

“Great, I’m starving!”

“Geez, calm down, Akihito!”

We all laughed as we walked to the room.

6

“This is our spring full-course meal, with Tajima wagyu beef as the main dish,” the waitress informed us.

The manager, Holmes, Akihito, Kaori, and I picked up the menus on the table. Our eyes lit up upon reading the contents:

Aperitif: Kasumizuru plum wine (plum juice for me and Kaori)

Appetizer

Sashimi made with locally caught fish

Fresh boiled Kasumi crab

Kasumi crab hotpot

Tajima wagyu beef loin steak with a side of seasonal vegetables

Kasumi crab gratin

Shrimp tempura

Steamed grated lotus root

Young bamboo steamed in earthenware

Bamboo shoots with rice

Pickled vegetables

Dessert

“W-Wow!” I felt like I was going to be full just from looking at the extravagant menu.

“It sounds delicious, doesn’t it?” Holmes smiled.

I nodded. “Yes. I’ll have to thank Yanagihara again.”

“Definitely,” Kaori agreed.

“This calls for a toast!” said Akihito.

“Indeed.”

We toasted with our plum wine and juice. When the food arrived, my mouth watered at the deliciousness.

“This Tajima steak is really good,” said Kaori.

“Yeah, it’s so tender that you can cut it with chopsticks,” said Akihito.

“It’s great,” I agreed. “Ahh, the sashimi and the crab are also too good!” I closed my eyes, relishing the flavors. Holmes, who was sitting across from me, smiled cheerfully. “S-Sorry, I’m overreacting.” I blushed in embarrassment.

“No need to apologize,” he reassured. “You always seem to enjoy your meals a lot, and it makes me happy to see that. Kinosaki gets a lot of fresh seafood from the Sea of Japan. Northern Kansai is blessed with great meat and fish.”

“All hail northern Kansai!” Akihito exclaimed, holding up his beer. He’d already finished drinking the plum wine.

Everyone ate their food, praising it with every bite. Though there

were a lot of dishes, the individual portions were modestly sized, and they were brought out at just the right intervals for us to finish everything and feel full.

After the meal, we found ourselves going to the store next to the lobby.

“Ahh, I’m stuffed,” Akihito said, rubbing his stomach.

“Same here.” Kaori nodded, giggling. *It looks like she’s gotten used to Akihito. When you’re with him, you forget that he’s a celebrity. That might be one of his good traits.* The guests we walked past turned their heads when they saw him, but they didn’t call out.

“Hey, Holmes, let’s have a match!” Akihito put his hands on the air hockey table in the game area and looked at Holmes confidently.

“Sure. I’ll beat you at your own game,” Holmes said with a very calm face. Kaori’s eyes widened at his response.

“Sorry, but that’s my line. If I win, you gotta say, ‘It’s my loss. I’m nothing compared to you, Master Akihito.’”

“Very well. But relax, you don’t have to say anything if I win. Lament your loss in silence.”

“Ugh, you really piss me off!”

I smiled awkwardly at their usual banter. “He never shows Akihito any mercy, huh?”

Meanwhile, Kaori, who wasn’t used to them acting like this, was panicking and looking away.

With that, Holmes and Akihito’s grand air hockey battle began...but as expected, it was an overwhelming victory for Holmes.

“Dammit, this sucks. Your playstyle’s nasty, man.”

“It’s your fault for foolishly falling for every single trick.”

“Calm down, you two,” I said.

“They were the center of attention, though,” Kaori noted.

After playing in the game area, we went outside to the courtyard, where the cherry blossoms were in full bloom. The ones in the hot spring district were magnificent too, but these were even more beautiful. I saw the manager, the proprietress, and Saori walking around, talking cheerfully. The two women seemed to be telling him about the garden. Saori had changed into a cream-colored dress.

“So this is where the manager was,” I murmured.

Holmes nodded. “It appears so.”

There was one other person with them. “Hm?” I squinted. The fourth person was a beautiful, short-haired girl...or not.

“Kiyo!”

It was Rikyu. He noticed us and waved as he ran up to us with a grin.

“Oh!” Kaori blushed and covered her mouth with her hand. “Wh-

Who is that adorable boy? An idol?"

"B-But in terms of handsomeness, I'm better." Akihito crossed his arms, eyeing his new rival.

Holmes blinked and looked down at Rikyu. "Why are you here, Rikyu?"

"Because I heard you all went on a trip together, duh. How could you leave me behind? I wish you would've at least asked if I wanted to come." Rikyu pouted.

"Ah, sorry about that. This trip was originally just for Aoi and her friend, Kaori. The rest of us tagged along."

"Oh, okay." Rikyu readily accepted Holmes's answer. "Sorry for showing up without asking, Aoi." He flashed me an angelic smile.

"N-No, it's okay." All I could do was shake my head awkwardly.

"Is this your friend?" He looked at Kaori, who promptly averted her eyes, flustered.

"Rikyu, Kaori is the younger sister of Saori, the Saio-dai," Holmes explained, nodding in Saori's direction. "Their family owns Miyashita Kimono Fabrics."

"Huh," Rikyu murmured. He smiled cutely and bowed. "Nice to meet you, Kaori. I'm Rikyu Takiyama. Kiyo and I are like brothers."

Kaori looked around frantically, blushing furiously. "N-Nice to meet you too," she stammered before bowing back.

Akihito looked back and forth between Rikyu and Holmes and chuckled. "Aww, your little brother calls you Kiyo. I think I'll call you that too, Kiyo!"

Rikyu glanced at Akihito for a second before ignoring him in favor of Holmes. "Hey, Kiyo, do you know this guy that has no manners?"

"Yes, I know of him. He's an actor named Akihito. His father is the author Naotaka Kajiwarara."

"What do you mean, you know 'of' me?!" Akihito immediately protested. Everyone burst out laughing. Even the manager and Saori chuckled as they came to us.

"You're all such good friends," Saori said with a giggle. She looked stunning under the cherry blossom trees, and I found myself admiring her.

"Saori's really pretty, as you'd expect from the famous Saio-dai," Rikyu said. "Hey, Kiyo, stand next to her for a sec." He pulled Holmes by the hand and stationed him next to Saori. "Oh!" He clapped his hands. "Just as I thought."

"Huh?" Holmes and Saori tilted their heads.

"I thought you'd look good together. You know, Kiyo, the proprietress was just talking about how Saori's not taken, even though she's so pretty. You should just go out with her."

"Wh-What?" Saori blushed and looked down.

“Rikyu, that’s disrespectful to Saori,” Holmes chided with a strained smile.

“But I really think it’s true. You and Saori, the beautiful and smart Saio-dai, would be a great match.”

“Hmm, yeah,” Akihito agreed. “If you told me they were a couple, I’d totally believe it.”

“Exactly, Akihito. Sorry for calling you a guy that has no manners.” Rikyu smiled cheerfully. Then he looked at me and asked, “Aoi, you think so too, right?”

“Huh?” I froze at the sudden question. Kaori gave me a worried look, and Holmes had a weak expression on his face. *Holmes and Saori...* “Y-Yes... I think they suit each other.” I nodded. *It’s true. Like Rikyu said, they look perfect standing next to each other. I honestly do think they’re a good match.* My heart ached and I cast my eyes down.

“Rikyu, Saori is already in a relationship, so your commentary is disrespectful to her,” Holmes said bluntly.

“Huh?!” Saori looked up at him in shock.

Kaori and I blinked too.

“O-Oh dear,” Saori said, reverting to her Kyoto accent out of distress. “How...how did you know, Holmes?”

“Wait, it’s true?” Kaori asked. “You have a boyfriend, Sis?”

“Y-Yes, but I haven’t told anyone...” Saori looked down awkwardly.

“Sorry, I knew you were hiding it.” Holmes bowed, seemingly sincerely apologetic.

Holmes instantly catches on to things, but he doesn’t reveal the secrets he notices. He might say them out loud on purpose, but he would never do it by accident. Why did he reveal Saori’s secret this time? Was it deliberate?

Saori shook her head and said, “It’s okay. I don’t want my parents to know, but I was thinking of talking to Kaori about it, so this is a good opportunity. Plus...I was hoping to get your advice on him, Holmes, but I wasn’t sure if it’d be asking for too much.” She fidgeted as she spoke.

Holmes placed his hand on his chest and nodded. “By all means. Please allow me to make up for revealing your important secret,” he said in a firm tone. *He probably does feel bad.*

“In that case, I’ll take you up on that offer.” Saori smiled happily.

“Shall we go back inside first?” the manager asked. Everyone nodded.

room, it was twice as big as the others. It seemed like a deluxe suite. We all looked around, oohing and aahing.

“Famous authors get special treatment, huh?” Akihito murmured, his hands folded behind his head.

“That’s the manager for you,” said Rikyu, sitting in a chair by the window.

“No, it’s just because we have a working relationship,” the manager said meekly.

“Dad wrote a book that took place in Kinosaki and based it on this inn,” Holmes explained, pouring cold sake into the manager’s cup.

“Apparently they give him special treatment because of that.” He opened the fridge and asked, “What does everyone want to drink?”

“Oh, I can get it myself, Holmes.” I hurriedly walked up to the fridge.

“Don’t worry about it.” Holmes shook his head. “There’s cold tea and several other types of non-alcoholic drinks.”

“Okay, I’ll have tea then.”

“Me too,” said Kaori.

“I’ll have the same,” said Saori.

The three of us bowed in thanks.

Akihito quickly raised his hand and said, “Beer for me!”

“Here.” Holmes plunked a can of beer on the floor and immediately moved on to pouring tea.

“I-Is it just me or was that kinda rude?” Akihito dejectedly picked up the can.

Saori sipped the cold tea she received from Holmes and sighed. “I was really surprised. How did you know that I secretly have a boyfriend, when I haven’t told any of my family or friends?” she asked with a puzzled expression.

Holmes smiled. “My grandfather often told me that you didn’t have a boyfriend. He’d say, ‘Saori’s a real looker, but apparently she’s single. Must be ‘cause she’s out of everyone’s league.’”

Saori blushed and shrugged.

“If you got a boyfriend, then your parents would surely be surprised and talk to my grandfather about it,” Holmes continued. “The news would doubtlessly reach my ears before long. However, I’ve heard no such thing. That’s why I assumed you were keeping it a secret from your parents.”

“B-But before that, how did you know I have a boyfriend at all?” Saori asked, leaning forward.

“Well... It’s a man’s intuition.” He held his index finger in front of his mouth and smiled charmingly.

Kaori, Saori, and I all gasped. Their faces were bright red, and I was sure mine was too. *A-A man’s intuition?!*

“Just kidding. It was the necklace.”

“Huh?”

“You were wearing that new necklace with the kimono too, right? I sensed that you didn’t want to take it off, in which case it could’ve been a gift from a boyfriend.”

Oh, I see. Even I’d felt that something was up with that necklace. It clearly didn’t match her work kimono. Saori must know that too, but she still doesn’t want to take it off. It makes sense to assume it’s a present from her boyfriend. But since Holmes didn’t hear about her getting a boyfriend, he concluded that she must be keeping it a secret. The logic checks out, but...Holmes’s perceptiveness really is a force to be reckoned with.

“You really do see everything,” Saori murmured softly, looking down at her lap. She seemed stunned. *Even knowing that Holmes is like this, it’s still bad for your heart.* “I bet my parents would gladly approve if it was someone like you, Holmes.” She smiled listlessly.

“Do you think they would disapprove of your partner?” Holmes asked quietly.

Saori glanced at Kaori. “My parents and my sister think too highly of me. They’re always saying, ‘Saori will definitely find a brilliant person,’ or, ‘A wonderful man will fall in love with her at first sight.’ But even though I admire brilliant people, the ones I truly fall in love with aren’t the type that generally receives praise,” she said slowly.

Anyone would be jealous of Saori’s beauty and talent. She would be a worthy partner for any man, no matter how amazing. I could understand why her family would say those things. But apparently, the person she was actually in love with wasn’t someone her parents would be happy about. *When she called Holmes “cool,” maybe it was purely aspirational.*

“I...volunteered at a library throughout all of last year, and that’s where I met him,” she continued. “He was skinny and had longish hair tied back in a ponytail. He had a unique aura, and since he always had paint on him somewhere, I assumed he was an art student. I was drawn to his daintiness and grace, and before I knew it, I was always watching him read at his usual window seat.”

I imagined the scene as I listened to her—a man who seemed like an art student, reading a book at the library in the rays of the setting sun, and Saori watching him in secret.

“The books he read were mainly art textbooks and detective novels. I knew he liked mystery books. Wanting to get his attention, I tried reading nearby and greeting him, but he never looked at me. Rather, whenever our eyes met, he’d immediately look away.” She sighed dejectedly.

It probably never even crossed his mind that such a beautiful woman was trying to get his attention. I smiled at their charming struggles to get

onto the same page.

“That was last June. I got busier with my Saio-dai work, and my feelings grew during the time when I couldn’t see him... I finally decided to strike up a conversation. I said, ‘You read a lot of mysteries, huh?’ He looked up at me in surprise, gave a vague affirmation, and averted his eyes, much to my dismay. Still, I worked up the courage to say, ‘I like mysteries too. What books would you recommend?’”

Saori really did her best... I felt my chest grow warm at the thought of her bravery.

“Then he offered me two of the books he had with him, saying, ‘I already finished reading these. They’re very interesting.’ The books were written by Seishi Yokomizo and Akimitsu Takagi. I’d only so much as heard their names before, but I went ahead and said, ‘Oh, Yokomizo and Takagi! I love them. I read all of their works.’ Even though it was a lie, that was what led to us getting closer...”

I felt like I could understand her mindset. I’m sure she was even lying about liking mystery novels in the first place. She lied out of desperation to get closer to him.

“After that initial icebreaker, I was able to talk to him more often. I even found the courage to invite him to see a movie during summer break. I learned that he left art university and was working at an art gallery. He entered countless painting competitions but was never selected. He accepted that he wouldn’t be able to paint professionally, but deep down inside, he still wanted recognition. He even told me that he wished he could make a living off of painting, but he understood that it was a naive hope.

“Then he showed me his paintings... They were wonderful and moved my heart. I felt drawn to his sentiments, insecurity, and talent. So I bravely asked, ‘Could you paint me?’ His response was, ‘There could be no greater honor than being allowed to paint you, the Saio-dai.’ I was happy but sad at the same time.” She looked downcast as she spoke.

It’s an honor to be praised as the Saio-dai, but she must’ve wanted the person she loved to see her for herself, not her title. Most of all, the way he said “you, the Saio-dai” made it seem like there was a wall between them.

“I went to his place and he painted my portrait. Then we...um...” Saori clammed up, her blush reaching as far as her ears.

“S-Sis...” Kaori gaped at her, lost for words.

It didn’t need to be said outright for us to understand that they did the deed there. I felt embarrassed too and looked down. On the other hand, Akihito and Rikyu were starry-eyed and the manager gave a kind smile.

“That’s wonderful,” Holmes said with a grin.

“Wh-What?”

“It is. A romance between an artist and a Saio-dai is like something you’d read in a novel.” *It does seem like the kind of setting Holmes would like.*

“But I couldn’t introduce him to anyone, because I knew they wouldn’t approve,” Saori continued, bringing me back to my senses.

I could understand how she felt. Her parents must’ve wanted someone with a respectable background and career for her. Even if their standards weren’t *that* high, they still might’ve been opposed to someone who quit school to become a painter, only to never win a single competition.

“Then he said, ‘You must be embarrassed to be going out with a man like me, right?’ But that’s not true. I just didn’t want people who don’t know anything about his good points to speak poorly of him.”

I could sympathize with both of them.

“Later on, he said, ‘I want to become a man worthy of you,’ and started painting fervently as if he’d been possessed. Apparently there’s a major award in April that he’s working towards...”

April? That’s next month.

“He can paint in any style, but he’s best at ink wash paintings and watercolors. At the beginning of the year, he left for China to study there and improve his technique...” She stopped there, with a lonesome look in her eyes.

Before they could solidify their relationship, he left to study abroad. However, it was for the sake of bettering himself for her. Saori had to be happy about it, but in the end, she couldn’t help but be lonely and afraid. *When we were in the bath and she said, “You’re lucky that you get to stay close, Aoi,” maybe she meant, “You’re lucky that you get to be near the person you like.”*

“That must’ve been painful,” Holmes said gently. He smiled sympathetically.

“Yes. We’ve barely kept in touch, nor have we made any plans or promises. But at the beginning of this month, on my birthday, this necklace arrived, along with something else...” Saori took a hanging scroll out of the tote bag lying next to her. She placed it on the table.

“A hanging scroll? May I have a look?”

“Please do.” Saori bowed.

Holmes put on his white gloves and picked up the scroll. There was a note attached. He looked up as if to confirm if he could read it, and Saori nodded. He gently removed the note, which said:

Wanting to see the ultimate scenery, I’ve now come to Mongolia, where the ground is covered in a blanket of pure white.

As I stand in the cold wind, awed by the endless horizon, I recall the beauty of Japan’s four seasons—and you.

Saori, I've included in this painting my feelings and a message for you.

His letter was written in beautiful handwriting. After reading it, Holmes carefully unrolled the scroll.

“Wow!” Kaori and I exclaimed inadvertently.

It was a beautiful painting of a mountain covered in cherry blossoms. At the bottom, a small dancer wearing a traditional *suikan* robe was performing with a folding fan. The lines were very delicate and the colors were gorgeous.

“The cherry blossoms on Mount Yoshino... This is a wonderful painting. It’s brimming with the sentiments of someone in an extreme land, longing for his beloved in his home country,” Holmes said passionately. He must’ve been moved. *The painting is overflowing with emotion.*

“Thank you,” Saori said. “I was moved by this painting too, but, well, I couldn’t figure out what his message was.” She looked down, ashamed.

Holmes widened his eyes, then chuckled. “I see. That’s too bad.”

“You can tell what it is, right, Holmes?” Saori asked, leaning forward.

Holmes continued to smile, neither affirming nor denying it. “Saori, what did you think when you saw this painting?” He quickly turned the scroll to face her.

“I thought it was very beautiful. Delicate, elegant...”

“Yes, indeed,” Holmes said, still looking at the painting. “Vivid colors, a radiant landscape—I think that this beauty is a sign of love. You were in love with him before you started dating, but perhaps he was in love with you as well—or to be precise, he admired you.”

“He did?” Saori looked like she couldn’t believe it.

I think Holmes is right, though. Maybe it wasn’t only the books that brought him to the library. Maybe he caught a glimpse of Saori somewhere and began to admire her. He must’ve heard the rumors that she was the Saio-dai that year and was volunteering at the library. Being a talented artist, he must have a strong admiration for beautiful things. When he went to the library, it might’ve been less of a one-sided crush and more of a pure desire to appreciate a beautiful person.

“If he truly did admire you, then it’s understandable why he behaved awkwardly when you approached him,” Holmes continued. “He was surprised and bewildered.”

“Oh...” Saori put her hand in front of her mouth. *She must be recalling his aloof attitude when she spoke to him for the first time.*

“He may have considered it a miracle that you talked to him. Now, what was the factor that led to that miracle?” Holmes asked gently.

Saori furrowed her brow as she thought. “U-Um, mystery novels?”

Holmes smiled and nodded. "Correct. Are you ready, Saori?"
"Y-Yes."

"Humans are quick to lie, whether it be to keep relationships running smoothly or to protect themselves. In my opinion, there are lies that one should let slide, and lies that one shouldn't. In the near future, you may have to either admit to him that you lied about liking mystery novels, or work towards turning it into the truth so that you can understand his interests. This is because in his eyes, mystery novels were an instrument of fate."

"Huh?" Saori blinked.

"Never in his wildest dreams would he think that you'd lie to get closer to him, right? He seriously believed that you like mystery novels and read all of your favorite authors' works. To him, mystery novels were what linked you two together. Thus, he used a passage from that instrument of fate to paint his feelings."

"S-So this painting is a scene from a mystery novel?"

"Yes." Holmes nodded.

To me, the scene in the painting looked more like something from one of the manager's historical novels. Saori and I, both unfamiliar with mystery authors, tilted our heads in confusion. Kaori and Akihito seemed puzzled too.

"Which author is it?" Saori asked.

"Akimitsu Takagi," Holmes answered.

"Akimitsu Takagi?"

"Yes. Among his works is a novel called *The Mystery of Genghis Khan*. In it, a hospitalized detective named Kyosuke Kamizuki tries to determine whether the much-discussed theory that Minamoto no Yoshitsune became Genghis Khan when he was older is true. It's an armchair detective mystery that looks into the past."

"What does 'armchair detective' mean?" Saori asked timidly.

"It's a term for a detective who doesn't go to the crime scene, instead basing his deductions mainly on testimony and written records."

Saori nodded in understanding.

"The book brought up several facts, analyses, and references that suggested Genghis Khan really was Minamoto no Yoshitsune, but there was no decisive evidence. At the end, it arrived at the mystery behind the name 'Genghis Khan.'"

Everyone gulped.

Holmes opened his notebook and wrote down the Chinese characters for "Genghis Khan" vertically. "In that book, the detective deduced that the name was an abbreviation of 'At Yoshino, I yearn for *suikan*.'"

"Huh?"

“The first character is ‘at,’ the second character is the ‘Yoshi’ in ‘Mount Yoshino,’ and the third character is ‘yearn.’ The fourth character, ‘Khan,’ is a compression of the characters for *suikan*, a type of robe worn by nobles in the Heian period. Here, *suikan* refers to Lady Shizuka, court dancer and mistress of Minamoto no Yoshitsune—in other words, he put his feelings into his own name: ‘At Mount Yoshino, I yearn for Shizuka.’ He became such a grand hero because he wanted Lady Shizuka in Japan to notice his name and realize that it meant, ‘I miss you.’ That’s how the book interpreted it.”

Everyone gaped at his explanation, dumbfounded. *It’s only the book’s theory, but if that hero really was Minamoto no Yoshitsune, naming himself that out of love for Lady Shizuka, then that would be such a heartrending, romantic tale.*

“I presume that your boyfriend rarely said out loud that he missed you?” Holmes asked.

Saori nodded firmly. “R-Right, he didn’t. It was always me saying it. All he said was, ‘I’ll be back in spring.’”

“I’m sure he couldn’t say it when it was he who selfishly went abroad. He may have thought that he didn’t have the right to say it. However, he really was desperate to see you again, and he put those uncontainable feelings into this painting. When he was painting this, he would’ve been thinking about the upcoming spring and looking at the cherry blossoms with you after completing his training. Since you said you were a fan of Akimitsu Takagi and read all of his works, he assumed you would understand the meaning behind this painting. Just as Yoshitsune longed for Lady Shizuka in that book, he’s longing for you...and it’s already cherry blossom season now. I’m sure he’ll be returning soon.”

Saori burst into tears. “Th-Thank you.” She covered her mouth to stifle her sobs as the tears streamed down her cheeks.

She must’ve been so lonely this whole time. Since she kept him a secret from everyone, there was no one she could share her feelings with. All she could do was pine for him.

“S-Saori... I’ll pray that he does well in the competition next month,” I said.

“Thank you,” Saori said, smiling beautifully behind her tears.

“Sis...” Kaori began quietly.

Saori cast her eyes down, seeming apologetic. “Sorry for not telling you, Kaori.”

Kaori shook her head. “No, it’s fine. Like you said, I’m sure I would’ve been opposed to him. But now that I’ve seen this painting, there’s nothing I can say. It really is amazing.”

Saori smiled, looking genuinely happy. “Thanks, Kaori. I’ll introduce him to you when he comes back.”

“Y-Yeah, I want to meet him.”

Kaori and Saori smiled at each other. The room was enveloped in a warm atmosphere.

“Now then, since we came all this way, shall we take a stroll around Kinomoto’s hot spring district?” Holmes asked cheerfully as if to change the mood.

Everyone exchanged looks and stood up.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Akihito agreed.

“Okay,” I said.

We all headed out to the street. The nighttime lights in the hot spring district gave it a mystical ambience. The river reflected their gentle glow. Steam rose from the atmospheric inns, giving the air that hot spring smell. Men and women of all ages were smiling and laughing, wearing yukata, and visiting the gift shops lining the road. It felt like we were at a festival. We all enjoyed our stroll through the refreshing, old-fashioned street.

“Whoa, there’s hot spring buns and *kamaboko* fish cakes!” Akihito exclaimed, eyes lighting up. “Let’s try them, guys!” He ran off.

“There’s no need to run,” Rikyu said. “They’re not going anywhere.” He gave a slightly exasperated shrug.

“Do you want to buy souvenirs for your family, Aoi?” Kaori asked.

“I think I’ll do that tomorrow,” I replied.

“Yes, I think that’s better,” Saori said. “If you bought them now, you’d have to carry them around.”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“This is good!” Akihito said when we caught up to him. He was already stuffing his face.

“Oh no, Akihito’s holding a bun in one hand and *kamaboko* in the other,” Kaori said. She and Saori were both laughing, while Rikyu shrugged again, saying, “He’s like a kid.”

I felt relieved as I watched them from behind. “Saori’s smiling cheerfully now, huh?” I murmured to Holmes, who was standing next to me.

“Indeed,” he said. “Good for her.”

“Saori’s parents might be opposed, but her boyfriend is definitely talented. I think their relationship is wonderful.”

“Yes. He looks soft, but he’s firm on the inside. I’m sure he’ll receive recognition one day.”

“Huh? Do you know who he is, Holmes?”

“I have a hunch, yes.”

“Wh-Who is it?”

“It’s a secret.” He held his index finger in front of his mouth. *If he’s going to hint at it like that, I wish he’d just tell me.* “Actually, you didn’t know who she was talking about?”

“Wait, is it someone I know?” I asked, surprised.

Holmes’s eyes widened and he rubbed his chin. “Well, I suppose it’s understandable that you didn’t figure it out, considering the circumstances.”

“Um, what does that mean?”

“I’m sure you’ll know who it is soon.”

“Fine... Anyway, that sure was a roundabout love letter. Was there a need to be that grandiose?” I sighed.

Holmes smiled wryly. “Indeed...but I can understand why he did that.”

“Huh? How come?” *Why would he have to use a roundabout message like that?*

“Pretentiousness is a facade for cowardice.” He looked up at the cherry blossoms with sad eyes. It almost seemed as if he were talking about himself.

I tilted my head. “Did you express your feelings in a roundabout way before, Holmes?”

He hesitated before saying, “Yes, perhaps.”

“Perhaps? Did your feelings get across?”

“Not in the slightest, apparently.” He smiled cheerfully.

“Then that means it doesn’t work, right?”

“It’s fine. I just felt like saying it, and I didn’t expect my message to get across.”

“What would you have done if it *did* get across?”

“That’s a good question... Either I would’ve scattered like these cherry blossoms, or I would have created a dangerous rationalization.”

“A dangerous rationalization?” I blinked, utterly confused.

Holmes smiled cheerfully again. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Uh, okay... Oh right, I noticed Saori’s necklace too, but I didn’t think much of it. I’m impressed that you instantly made the connection that she had a secret boyfriend.”

Holmes crossed his arms and said, “To be honest, I realized before I saw the necklace. I sensed it ever since I saw her standing in front of the inn.”

“Huh? How?”

“Her aura. I wasn’t lying when I said it was ‘a man’s intuition.’ When we met Saori before, even though she was past twenty, she had the aura of a young girl. But today, her mannerisms were completely that of an adult woman. I instantly sensed that she had a lover,” he said without hesitation.

I was stunned. *Behind that elegant smile of his, he’s picking up on things like that?*

“Ah, my apologies. That was too much information.” He put his hand in front of his mouth.

"It's okay." I shook my head with a strained smile.

"I don't reveal all of my thoughts to other people, but when it's you, I can't bring myself to lie."

Come to think of it, he said something similar before. "Um, why is that?" I asked quietly.

Holmes looked conflicted. "I...don't know."

"Huh?"

"I don't understand myself."

"O-Oh."

"As I'm sure you're aware, I'm incredibly two-faced. Normally I can hide my inner self, but I can't when I'm with you. I say my thoughts out loud without thinking, and sometimes I make mistakes because of that..."

"Umm, is that because you don't have to be considerate of me?" I asked, tilting my head.

Holmes immediately looked up and shook his head. "N-No, that's definitely not the case."

"Really?"

"Really." He nodded. Then, as if he'd just thought of something, he put his hands on his hips and sighed. "And even though I say these needless things out loud without thinking, it's not so easy for the things that matter..."

"Huh?" I looked up at him.

"It's nothing." He shook his head. "I recently realized that you must have a heart of gold. It's possible that I subconsciously sense your tolerance and depend on it."

"What?" I asked in utter disbelief. *I have a heart of gold and Holmes depends on it...* "Wh-What are you talking about? My heart is copper at best," I insisted.

"Copper?" Holmes's expression relaxed. "That's cute."

"N-Not at all."

He chuckled and smiled warmly. Behind him, cherry blossom petals fluttered in the air. I suddenly felt my cheeks heat up and quickly looked down at the ground.

"Is something wrong?" He peered into my face.

I fervently shook my head. "No, um, I just remembered that time when people were calling you 'a beautiful young man with the grace of a weeping cherry tree.'"

"I'll have to apologize to the weeping cherry trees."

"Apologize?" I inadvertently giggled.

A strong gust of wind blew by, intensifying the petals' dance.

"The wind has gotten chilly," he announced to the group. "Shall we return to the inn?"

"Okay!" everyone answered.

“Kinosaki’s really nice at night, huh?” Akihito remarked.

“Yeah,” agreed Kaori and Saori.

We started walking towards the inn.

“Since I’m busy with work, this might be the first time I’m getting to appreciate it like this,” Saori said. Then, she suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“Saori?” I looked back at her and my eyes widened at what I saw. A man stood there—a man I recognized.

“Yoneyama...” murmured Akihito, beating me to the punch.

It was Ryosuke Yoneyama, the former counterfeiter who washed his hands of the business after the owner exposed him. Now he works at an art gallery. His somewhat long hair was tied back in a ponytail and he had an androgynous look. As usual, he was smiling weakly.

Oh. Saori’s boyfriend is Yoneyama. Suddenly, everything made sense. Yoneyama lost contests even though he had skill. But more importantly, Yoneyama was the one who painted that scroll. That’s why Holmes asked if I figured out who it was—because I’ve seen one of Yoneyama’s paintings before. But since it was in the style of Diego Velázquez, it was completely different from the one we saw today. Still, if I couldn’t tell that it was the same artist, then I have a long way to go. I slumped my shoulders, feeling slightly dejected.

“It’s not your fault,” Holmes said immediately, sensing my thoughts. “He’s a prodigy who can paint in completely different styles.”

Considering that such a prodigy couldn’t win any contests, it seems like skill isn’t always rewarded in the world of art.

“Yoneyama and Saori don’t really suit each other,” Rikyu mumbled extremely quietly, seeming disappointed.

“Ryosuke...” Saori stood stock-still, trembling. It was as if she thought she was dreaming.

“Saori.” Yoneyama held out his hands.

Saori ran forward and leaped into his arms. “Ryosuke!” She cried as he held her tightly.

“I’m back, Saori. I’m sorry for making you lonely.” He stroked her head.

The rest of us looked at each other, nodded, and quietly left the happy couple alone in the fluttering cherry blossoms.

It was a beautiful night in Kinosaki.

Chapter 2: A Book Club Party

1

At the end of March, when we'd just barely returned from Kinosaki, the card arrived at Teramachi-Sanjo's antique store Kura.

"Mail for you," said the familiar postman as he handed me a stack of letters. I bowed, took the mail, and turned around to look at Holmes, who was sitting behind the counter.

"There seems to be a lot of mail today, Holmes," I said.

"Thanks for getting that," he replied. "I expect most of it to be direct mail." He put down the local newspaper he was reading and smiled.

"Oh, you're right." Brochures from other art and antiques businesses, restaurant coupons, beauty salon ads... I checked them one by one as I put them on the counter, and stopped upon seeing a unique card. "What's this...?"

Dear Kiyotaka Yagashira, the Holmes of Kyoto,

As previously mentioned, you are cordially invited to the 221st Assembly, to be held on April 1st at 3 p.m. The location is the place where he once died. That is your hint. However, you may arrive on any vehicle of your choice.

If you truly cannot figure it out, please contact me. However, at that point, you shall renounce the name of Holmes.

From S.H.

In a corner of the card was a symbol—the side profile of Sherlock Holmes with a pipe in his mouth.

"Um..." I stared at the card, dumbfounded.

Holmes reached out to take it. After reading it, he chuckled and said, "Ah, the usual."

"Who's S.H.? D-Do they have something to do with Sherlock Holmes?"

"Yes, I suppose you could say so. This person's name is Hiroshi Sugiura."

"H-Hiroshi Sugiura? Wouldn't his initials be H.S., then?"

"Yes, but he uses S.H. because he wants to have the same initials as Sherlock Holmes."

"O-Oh."

"By the way, my initials are K.Y., but I'd much rather go by Y.K." K.Y. is a common abbreviation for *kuuki yomenai*—someone who can't

take a hint.

"I don't blame you," I said. *But in Holmes's case, you could say he's kuuki yomisugiru—someone who notices too many hints.* "So what's this mysterious card about?" The line about vehicles struck me as odd.

"It's an invitation to a party held by the West Japan Sherlock Holmes Club, or the WJSHC for short. Hiroshi 'S.H.' Sugiura is the organizer this time." Holmes smiled.

"The West Japan Sherlock Holmes Club...?"

"There's a gathering called the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club for lovers and researchers of Sherlock Holmes—in other words, Sherlockians. The WJSHC is a small-scale offshoot of that."

"Do you belong to that club, Holmes?" *I didn't even know such a thing existed.*

"Yes, although I don't attend their meetings. I'm thinking of going this time, though, since it's a commemorative one." Holmes took out an atlas, flipped through the pages, and nodded. "All right."

"Um, do you know what the location is?"

"It's likely in Murasakino Ueno-cho."

"H-Huh? How do you know that?" I looked at the text on the card.

"Do you know of the place where Sherlock Holmes once apparently died?"

"Um..." I looked up at the ceiling and recalled a drawing of Holmes and Professor Moriarty arguing. "I-It was a waterfall, right? He fell in with Professor Moriarty, or something like that."

"Correct, it was Reichenbach Falls. The falls are located in Switzerland, at the coordinates 46 North, 8 East. The line, 'However, you may arrive on any vehicle of your choice' indicates that the hint is referencing a vehicle, in which case the city bus route 46 comes to mind. Starting from the north, the eighth stop on the route is Murasakino Ueno-cho."

"O-Oh."

"Hiroshi Sugiura, the organizer, likes these kinds of riddles and uses them whenever he can," Holmes said, returning the atlas to the bookshelf.

"I see." *This party sounds kind of interesting.* I smiled.

Holmes turned around and asked, "Would you like to come with me, Aoi?"

"Huh? Can I?"

"Of course."

"Th-Then yes, I'd like to. Is it really okay, though? I don't know much about Sherlock Holmes."

"Don't worry, the members are always saying that everyone is welcome. Membership levels have been dropping over the years, you see. They're always open to visitors who are new to the fandom."

“Okay then, I’ll go.”

And so, I was to attend the WJSHC’s commemorative party.

2

On April 1st, Holmes and I headed for Murasakino Ueno-cho by car. We were driving north on Horikawa Street. To our left, I saw a stone *torii* gate with a pentagram in the middle.

“Oh, that’s Seimei Shrine!” I exclaimed, staring out the window. The pentagram was a symbol of Abe no Seimei, a famous diviner.

“Do you like Seimei Shrine?” Holmes asked.

I backed away from the window and said, “I’m just curious about it because it’s so famous. It’s smaller than I expected, though.”

“It is, and in the past, it had a more inconspicuous atmosphere. More people started visiting it during the divination fad, so the shrine got polished up. Nowadays it’s full of young girls.”

“That’s the power of trends, huh?” I looked ahead at the street.

“We don’t have time to stop by Seimei Shrine today, but we can visit another time, if you’d like.”

Holmes is so nice, offering since he knows I’m interested. He’s busy with university and the store, though, so I’d feel bad making him take me there.

“It’s okay, I’ll go with Kaori,” I said.

“Oh...” he said quietly, leaving it at that.

I stared absentmindedly at the road while listening to the music playing in the car. “Horikawa is a big street, huh?”

“Yes, although it’s only big by Kyoto standards.”

“You’re right. Big streets are rare in Kyoto. Is Oike Street the biggest one?”

“No, I think Gojo Street is wider.”

“I see.” I looked at Holmes. “Is the gathering going to be at a meeting hall?” I didn’t know much about Murasakino. *Are there any meeting places there?*

“No.” He shook his head. “Usually they rent a hotel or an event hall, but one of the members has a large estate in Murasakino, so they’re using that this time. Her name is Taeko Mamiya, and she’s a widow in her sixties. We call her ‘Madam’—”

“The Holmes Club has a member in her sixties?” I interrupted. *I thought for sure it’d be people around Holmes’s age—in other words, students.*

“Yes, the members span a wide range of ages.” He smiled cheerfully.

“I-I see.”

“That said, apparently Madam became a Sherlock Holmes fan

because of her housekeeper, a woman in her forties named Chie Nishizawa. Chie herself has a modern mindset and prefers to be called the ‘Mamiya butler’ rather than a maid. She was the one who joined the Holmes Club first. Madam’s legs are weak, so she can’t go outside much. Chie recommended Holmes books and movies to pass the time, and Madam became an avid fan. Today’s commemorative meeting will be held at Madam’s house.”

“Is it big enough for a gathering?”

“I’ve never gone there, so I don’t know. According to Sugiura, it’s quite stately.”

“I see.” *Come to think of it, ever since I started working at Kura, I’ve been visiting a lot of fancy houses. There was the Yagashira estate in Higashiyama, the Takamiya estate in Okazaki, the Yanagihara estate in Arashiyama, and the Saito estate in Takagamine. They might not surprise me anymore,* I thought as I looked out the window.

But when I saw the Mamiya estate in Murasakino, I was surprised. It was a Victorian-style house that reminded me of the manor houses in foreign movies. Surrounding it was a true English garden, with a white gazebo in the middle. Spring flowers welcomed guests while also being a pretty sight for passersby.

By now, I’ve seen many types of houses: the Yagashira stone mansion, the Takamiya estate that resembled an old castle, Yanagihara’s traditional Japanese residence, and Saito’s hybrid Japanese-Western house. Mamiya’s has yet another different aesthetic. If a little girl were to walk past here, I’m sure she’d think she was in a fairy tale.

“I-It’s beautiful.” *Even I’m spellbound, and I’m not a little girl.*

“I hear that the people in the neighborhood call this the ‘Rose Manor.’ They don’t seem to be blooming this early in the year, though. Oh, there are cherry blossoms too. How lovely,” Holmes said as he got out of the car, impressed by the beautiful cherry blossoms behind the gazebo. We admired the manor from afar.

“Holmes,” came a man’s voice from behind us. I turned around and saw a man wearing a suit. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and he had a friendly smile on his face.

“Good to see you again, Sugiura,” Holmes replied.

“It’s been what, two years? You finally turned up.” The man gave Holmes a light smack on the arm, then looked at me. “Is this a friend from university? Thanks for bringing a newcomer.”

“This is Aoi Mashiro, a part-timer at our store,” Holmes explained.

“I see. Nice to meet you. I’m Hiroshi Sugiura, and my side job is writing.”

“N-Nice to meet you, I’m Aoi Mashiro,” I responded. “U-Um, what do you mean by ‘side job’?” I tilted my head.

“Aoi, the people here consider being a Holmes Club member their

primary occupation,” Holmes answered immediately. “Other jobs are categorized as side jobs.”

“O-Oh. So in your case, you’re a university student and an appraiser, but this club considers those side jobs?”

“Correct.” Holmes nodded with a smile as if the concept were completely normal. I could only gape at him. “I’m sorry I haven’t shown up in so long, Sugiura,” he continued. “My side jobs have been rather busy.”

“It’s all right. I’m just glad you came.”

“It’s the 221st Assembly, after all. I’m surprised you’re holding it at someone’s home, though.”

“Madam can’t walk well, so she can’t go to any other venues. She said we were welcome to use her house. As an organizer, it’s honestly really appreciated, since it means not having to pay a rental fee.”

“How many people are attending today?”

“Fifteen members, and each of them are bringing newcomers, so it should be around thirty people.”

We arrived at the gate, which was open. There was a sign on the ground in front of it that said “West Japan Sherlock Holmes Club — 221st Assembly.” We passed through the gate and were greeted by two young receptionists sitting at a long table draped in a white tablecloth. Upon seeing Holmes, they cheerfully exclaimed:

“Oh, it’s Yagashira Holmes!”

“Long time no see!”

They both looked like office ladies in their late twenties. The name tags on their chests said “Aimi Akashi” and “Hiroko Azuma.” Akashi was a dignified, smart-looking woman with her hair tied up, while Azuma had long wavy hair and seemed like a gentle older sister.

“It’s been a while,” Holmes said, bowing. “I’ve been a complete absentee.”

“Same here,” Azuma replied. “Today’s the first time I’ve shown up in a long time.” She handed Holmes a name tag that said “Kiyotaka Holmes Yagashira.” I was a bit surprised that even the Holmes Club used that nickname for him.

Akashi leaned over and asked, starry-eyed, “Is this your girlfriend?”

I quickly shook my head and said, “N-No, I’m a part-timer at his store. My name is Aoi Mashiro.”

Akashi smiled cheerfully and said, “Oh, a part-timer. Nice to meet you, and welcome to the West Japan Sherlock Holmes Club.”

“Umm, Aoi Mashiro...” Azuma murmured, writing my name on a piece of paper and inserting it into a holder. “Please wear this on your chest.”

“Okay, thank you.” I nodded and pinned the name tag to my

chest.

A smiling woman walked up to us and said, "Welcome to the Mamiya estate." The name tag on her chest said "Chie Nishizawa, Mamiya Butler." She looked to be in her mid-forties. She had brown hair in a bob cut, wore a kimono, and seemed to be quite a unique individual. *So this is the housekeeper here who calls herself a butler*, I thought as I bowed.

"Good to see you, Nishizawa," Holmes greeted. "The preparations must've been quite a lot of work. Thank you."

"Not at all," she replied. "The Uchiumi couple helped out."

"The organizers today are you, Sugiura, and the Uchiumis?"

"Yes, and Madam."

"I apologize for not being able to come help in advance. I'll be the almighty butler Nishizawa's handmaid today, so if you need anything at all, please ask."

"Oh no, you don't have to be a handmaid. We're getting a lot of guests today, so we need you to be our star attraction."

"I'll do my best. Oh, I brought a gift too—scones from a teahouse in Kitayama." Holmes smiled and handed over the gift.

"Why, thank you."

Sugiura, who was standing nearby, suddenly came over and said, "Nishizawa, I can help out with that too."

"Oh, don't force yourself," Nishizawa teased. "Instead, take all of these presents inside for me."

"You've always been a slave driver..."

"Oh? I thought all of the men in the WJSHC were English gentlemen at heart? How could you make a woman do manual labor? I make sure not to carry things when there's a man around." Nishizawa giggled and smacked Sugiura on the shoulder.

"Ah, I'll carry them," Holmes said quickly.

Nishizawa shook her head. "No, you have to entertain the girl who's accompanying you. That's also what a gentleman would do, right?"

"Thanks," Holmes said with a smile. "Come this way, Aoi."

"O-Okay." We bowed and walked into the garden. A couple in their mid-thirties was talking cheerfully under the white gazebo. The woman was wearing a kimono and the man was wearing a suit. *The butler, Nishizawa, was wearing a kimono too. This must be an important event.*

They both smiled and waved when they saw Holmes.

"Hey there, Yagashira Holmes," the man greeted.

"It's been a while," said the woman. "As handsome as always, I see."

"Long time no see." Holmes bowed. "Aoi, these are the Uchiumis.

They met each other at the Holmes Club and got married.”

I blinked in surprise. “Th-That can happen, huh?”

The couple chuckled and nodded.

“Yes, it means we share an interest, after all,” said the husband.

“We can discuss Holmes at home all we want,” said the wife.

“Right, the reason I joined the Holmes Club in the first place was because I wanted to talk about Sherlock Holmes.”

“Yagashira Holmes, do you talk to your lady friend about Sherlock too?”

“No, I do love Sherlock Holmes, but I have other interests too,” Holmes answered.

I nodded in understanding. *Holmes has a wide range of interests, including fine art. Though he does like Sherlock Holmes, it's not his #1 interest like it is for the other people here.*

“Oh, so you have many interests... You should talk about Sherlock more, though.” The husband pouted, disappointed.

“I should,” Holmes responded with a smile.

As we were talking, the number of people in the garden rapidly increased.

Holmes stretched and looked around. “Aoi, shall we go inside now?”

“Oh, okay.”

The wife pointed at a Western-style party hall on the other side of the cherry blossom trees and said, “The venue is over in that hall.”

“Thank you,” Holmes said. “We’ll see you later.”

As instructed, Holmes and I headed for the white Western-style hall. It looked like something from *Alice in Wonderland*. Rather than a traditional entrance, it had a first-floor balcony and doors with windows. We were also supposed to keep our shoes on.

The spacious hall was set up with long tables along the walls and round tables here and there. It looked like it was going to be a standing buffet. There was what looked like a simple fitting room set up by the windows, surrounded by bright red curtains. The people whose name tags had the word “Guest” on them seemed intrigued by the interior design. I was looking around excitedly too.

“It’s a lovely house,” Holmes said.

“Yes, it really is,” I replied. “There are people of all ages here too.”

“Indeed.”

“Oh, but I’m surprised that even Sherlockians call you ‘Holmes.’” *These people are hardcore Sherlock fans, but they’re not angry at Holmes for using that name?* I recalled when we first met Akihito, who was clearly upset about the nickname at the time.

Holmes chuckled. “They did disapprove at first.”

“Wait, really?”

“I first attended this club in high school because my senior who was on the same committee as me was a Sherlock Holmes fan. He half-dragged me to the club, saying, ‘Your nickname is Holmes, so you have to come.’”

“Th-That’s why? Is that senior coming today?”

“Apparently he can’t get out of work, so no. He was apologizing about it. Anyway, at the first regular meeting I attended, he introduced me with, ‘This guy’s last name is Yagashira, written with the character for ‘home,’ and he’s perceptive like Holmes, so that’s his nickname.’ Naturally, no one was thrilled about the idea.”

I nodded in understanding.

“Then, Sugiura said, ‘If you’re really as perceptive as Holmes, then guess what our side jobs are’...”

“D-Did you?”

“Only approximately, but yes. Then they accepted me as Yagashira Holmes.”

“W-Wow, so that’s what happened.” I imagined a high school-age Holmes guessing everyone’s jobs one after another. It was definitely believable.

A man who looked to be in his mid-fifties walked up to us, smiling cheerfully. “Hey, Yagashira Holmes.”

“Hello.” Holmes smiled back and bowed. “Long time no see. Aoi, this is Okawara. He’s an alumnus of my university who works as a lawyer.”

“That means you’re a lawyer from Kyoto University... That’s amazing,” I murmured.

“Nah, it’s only my side job.” Okawara grinned mischievously. He seemed more like a merry elementary school principal than a lawyer. “Anyway, Holmes, have you heard? Professor Sashihara brought a huge souvenir from America.”

“And what would that be?”

“He wouldn’t say. Apparently he won it at an auction. He said he wanted you to see it, though, so I bet it’s something Conan Doyle used.”

“Something Doyle used? But even if you show me a fountain pen or something, I don’t think I’ll be able to identify whether he truly used it or not.” Holmes smiled wryly and crossed his arms.

A skinny, bespectacled man around the same age as Okawara walked up to us, waving. “Hey there.”

“Speak of the devil, it’s Professor Sashihara,” said Okawara.

“It sure has been a while, Okawara.” They shook hands.

“Aoi, this is Sashihara, a professor at the University of Foreign Studies,” Holmes said. “Oh, but it’s only a side job, of course.”

“Y-Your side jobs are all so amazing,” I said. I couldn’t hide the strained look on my face in reaction to the Sherlockians’ playful fun.

“Holmes, come with me for a minute.” Professor Sashihara tugged on Holmes’s arm, leading us away from everyone else.

“Is this about the ‘souvenir’ Okawara mentioned?” Holmes asked.

“Yes. I was at an auction in America and came across this item. I impulsively bid and won, but I don’t know if it’s real or not.”

“What is it?”

Professor Sashihara hesitated before answering, “Let’s just say it’s another ‘John Smith.’ A Holmes one, at that.”

“What?” Holmes went pale. “At an American auction?”

“Yes. If anything, the fact that it was in America made it believable. I want you to take a look at it later, but first, take this.” Professor Sashihara took a card out of his pocket and gave it to Holmes. I couldn’t see it well, but there was a QR code on it.

The two of them whispered to each other for a while.

“Thank you,” Holmes said when they were done. “It’s greatly piqued my interest. Where is this treasure?”

“It’s over by the window, where the red curtains are. That’s where all of the treasures people brought in are being gathered. Akashi brought a film reel from Russia.”

“I see,” Holmes murmured. “Anyway, I’ll take a look at this first,” he said, holding up his phone.

“Yeah, thanks.”

I tilted my head, completely clueless as to what they were talking about.

3

A refreshing breeze blew in through the open doors and windows, prompting me to look outside. The large cherry blossom tree in the middle of the English garden didn’t quite match its surroundings, but it was beautiful nonetheless. Flags hung from the light poles, gazebo, and roof, as if it were a birthday party or a school sporting event. But these flags weren’t the national flag or anything like that—some of them were the Union Jack, and others depicted the silhouette of Sherlock Holmes’s side profile. *They really love Holmes, huh?*

As I was admiring their dedication, I noticed Sugiura, the Uchiumi couple, and the receptionists, Akashi and Azuma, setting up a semicircle of folding chairs in the hall. Holmes started helping them too at some point, and I hurriedly picked up one of the folding chairs that was leaning against the wall. It didn’t take long for the thirty or so chairs to be set up.

“Please have a seat, everyone,” Nishizawa, the butler, spoke into

the microphone. "It's time to begin."

There didn't seem to be assigned seating, so everyone sat wherever was convenient. Holmes and I sat next to each other at the end of one of the rows.

"The 221st Assembly of the WJSHC will now commence," said one of the receptionists. "My name is Azuma and I'll be your emcee for this commemorative meeting." She bowed.

"Hm? The emcee isn't Nishizawa, the butler?" asked Okawara, the lawyer, who was sitting in front of us.

Nishizawa lightly tapped him on the shoulder and said, "The emcee has to be a young lady, right? Questionable butlers wearing kimono work behind the scenes."

Everyone laughed cheerfully.

"First, a speech from our dear Madam, Taeko Mamiya, who kindly provided today's venue," Azuma announced.

Without a moment's delay, Nishizawa opened the door to reveal a woman waiting in a wheelchair.

"Thank you all for coming here today," began the gray-haired woman as Nishizawa pushed her wheelchair forward slowly. "My name is Taeko Mamiya. Everyone calls me 'Madam.' Please feel free to do so even if it's your first time here."

Madam was slender and looked to be in her late sixties. She wore a salmon pink cardigan and a long cream-colored skirt—a very springlike outfit. She had a gentle smile and a refined air.

"It's been ten years since I became a Sherlock Holmes fan," she continued. "After my husband passed away, I employed Chie Nishizawa—the self-proclaimed 'questionable butler.' Before that, I did love English culture, gardens, and *Alice in Wonderland*, but I hadn't read *Sherlock Holmes* because mystery wasn't my cup of tea. When my butler found out, she said, 'You're missing out on life if you haven't experienced Holmes.'" She smiled and giggled. "How could I *not* read it after being told that? But I didn't like reading about people dying or getting hurt, so I first read *The Red-Headed League*. I was intrigued by the idea of a strange association that only recruited people with red hair, and I enjoyed the story very much. That led to me becoming the big fan that I am now."

"Madam's a bigger Sherlockian than I am now," Nishizawa added.

"Why, that's not true." Madam shrugged and everyone chuckled. "I wanted to attend the regular meetings, but it just wasn't possible because of my condition. The 221st was too special for me to pass up on, though, so I selfishly asked to hold it at my house. Thank you so much for your consideration, everyone. For such an important meeting, it surely would've been better to hold it in a more convenient location." She gave an apologetic smile.

Everyone shook their heads and assured her it was fine.

Madam giggled and said, "Thank you. You're all such good folks. '221' is a special number for all of us, right?"

Everyone nodded.

Why is "221" a special number? I tilted my head.

"Many of us use '221' on our license plates or passwords, right?" she continued. "Can you raise your hand if you do?"

I gaped at how most of the people raised their hand. However, Holmes did not.

"Y-You don't use it?" I whispered in his ear.

"No, because using your own interests as passwords makes you vulnerable."

"O-Oh, I see." *It's just like him to say that. Wait, more importantly...*

"Um, why is '221' a special number?" I asked extremely quietly.

Holmes blinked. "Aoi, you don't know why?"

"I-Is it that surprising that I don't?"

"No, my apologies. Perhaps the general population wouldn't know either. Holmes lived in a flat managed by Mrs. Hudson, and the address was 221B Baker Street. As such, the number '221' is very special to fans."

"Oh..." *I know how it feels to be enthusiastic about the protagonist of your favorite book, but thinking that their house number is special seems kind of extreme.*

"I'm so glad the weather is nice today," Madam continued, prompting me to look at her again. "The cherry blossoms are in full bloom too... My late husband cherished that tree, so it's my treasure as well. I hope you'll admire it too. Now then, please enjoy the rest of the party." She bowed and everyone applauded.

"Next, the president of the WJSHC, Hiraoka," said the emcee.

A kind-looking man stood in front of everyone and bowed. He seemed to be in his sixties, around the same age as Madam. "Today is our momentous 221st meeting. As Madam said, '221' is a very special number to us Sherlockians. I'm happy to see that this special meeting has brought members that we don't usually see. We also have many guests today, which I am sincerely grateful for. Some people may hesitate to come because they're 'bandwagon' fans, but the WJSHC welcomes bandwagon fans—and anyone who's interested in Sherlock Holmes, even if they aren't familiar with it. Since we have so many guests here, I would ask that our members refrain from being too rabid, lest they scare our guests. Please express your love for Holmes appropriately, so that they won't get away." He winked, and the audience burst out laughing.

My face stiffened slightly as everyone clapped. *The members must not realize that they're already going overboard...and that the guests are*

already recoiling a bit...

“Next, I’d like to move on to member introductions,” Azuma said. “Since we have so many guests, please tell them what makes Holmes so great. We’ll start on that side, with Matsuda.” She looked towards a man who was sitting on the opposite end of the semicircle from us. He was likely in his late twenties, and he wore a black suit. He seemed to have the air of a researcher.

“It’s nice to meet all of our guests. My name is Ken Matsuda, and I work at Kyoto University Hospital as a side job.”

Yet another impressive side job...

“My child was born in February,” he continued.

“Oh, congratulations!” Everyone clapped, including the guests. It was certainly happy news.

“You see, I was excited because the expected date was February 21st—in other words, ‘221.’ As I watched over my wife who was suffering through labor pains, I prayed, ‘Please let the baby be born on February 21st,’ but it ended up taking until the 22nd. I later told my wife what I was thinking, and she was rather put off. She even said, ‘I’m glad it was the 22nd.’” He smiled wryly and shrugged.

The guests chuckled, sympathizing with his wife. The members, however, reacted differently:

“That’s such a shame, Matsuda.”

“It was so close.”

“If I have a kid one day, I want them to be born on February 21st too.”

I couldn’t help but gape at how they clenched their fists and genuinely felt bad for Matsuda.

“Next is Akashi,” the emcee prompted.

Akashi, one of the women who was at the reception desk, stood up and said in a crisp, cheerful voice, “Hello, my name is Aimi Akashi.” She bowed. “Just like Madam, I got into Holmes with *The Red-Headed League*. So, I recommend that book to our guests as well. Also, as side jobs, I keep Japan’s culture alive through art, and research Russian culture. My main job is researching Russia’s Holmes culture. Today, I brought a film reel from a Holmes screening in Russia. It comes with my translation notes.” She looked at the fitting room with red curtains that was set up by the windows. “I also brought Holmes merchandise sold in Russia. Later, there’ll be an auction for all of the items we brought. Half of the proceeds will go to the club’s operating fund, and the other half will be donated to volunteer organizations. We look forward to your bids.” She bowed again.

The members clapped and expressed their interest in bidding.

“Next, our only member who also belongs to London’s Holmes

Club, Makabe,” continued the emcee.

The man in his forties who was sitting next to Akashi stood up and said, “Hello, I’m Makabe. My side job has me going to England often, so I’m registered with the London branch as well. Our numbers in Japan have stagnated, but London is still going strong. I hope the WJSHC will get an influx of new members too. Also, I brought lots of Holmes merchandise from London. Please bid on anything that catches your eye.”

The guests seemed more starry-eyed than the members, wondering what London’s Holmes merchandise would be like. The club members were probably less intrigued because they’d already gone on pilgrimages to London themselves.

The next person to stand up was Sashihara, the professor from the University of Foreign Studies that Holmes was talking to earlier. “Hello, my name is Sashihara. Today I brought a Holmes-related item that I won at an auction in America, but unfortunately, it’s ‘view-only.’ I apologize, but I don’t want to give it up.” He seemed genuinely apologetic.

“Boooooo!” Okawara shouted with a mischievous grin.

“Please stop your blatant booing, Okawara,” responded Professor Sashihara. Everyone laughed. “Anyway, my recommendation to our guests would have to be *A Study in Scarlet*. It’s the first book in the series, and it was coincidentally my gateway into the world of Holmes. I got engrossed after that, and nowadays I have a habit of making the Holmes pose.” He grinned and made Sherlock Holmes’s thinking pose, bringing his hands together in front of his face. The other members made the same pose and laughed. “I’m happy to see so many guests today,” he continued. “Even if you’re put off by our love for Holmes, I hope you’ll watch us with a warm heart.” He smiled kindly and bowed.

The members’ friendly introductions continued. Eventually it was Holmes’s turn.

“Next is Yagashira, who even goes by the nickname ‘Holmes’ here,” said the emcee. Holmes nodded and stood up. From the comments on his looks, I could tell that the female guests were blushing.

“Hello, I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira. When I was little, I was nicknamed ‘Holmes’ because of the way my surname is written and the fact that I was good at quiz questions. I actually didn’t read *Holmes* until after I received that nickname. I decided to start from the first book, *A Study in Scarlet*, and before I knew it, I’d read all sixty stories that comprise the Sherlockian scripture.”

Wow, apparently they call these books “scripture.”

“When I finished reading them, it sunk in that I’d been nicknamed

‘Holmes,’ and I remember being very happy about that.”

So that’s how he feels about it... It’s actually my first time hearing that.

“Holmes has a superhuman aspect, but he’s by no means perfect or a saint—he lacks knowledge in literature and astronomy, and he gets involved in shady business. That human side of him is part of what makes him so great, right? I’m rarely able to attend these club meetings, but when I do, I love the enthusiasm. I’m looking forward to the rest of the day.” He smiled and placed his hand on his chest, making the women swoon. *Just like the butler, Nishizawa said, he’s going to be great at attracting new members.*

Sugiura, Okawara, the Uchiumi couple, Nishizawa, and Azuma introduced themselves as well. After everyone was done, Azuma proceeded to the next topic, saying, “The WJSHC meets once every two months to share our findings. Of course, since it’s Holmes-related research, we occasionally go a bit overboard, but both the presenters and the listeners enjoy it very much. Now, since today is a special occasion and we have many guests, we’d like to discuss something that doesn’t require any prior knowledge of Sherlock Holmes. I’d like to call up Mr. and Mrs. Uchiumi, who met each other through our club.” She looked at the couple.

The wife stood up and said, “Today, for our guests, I’d like to talk about Conan Doyle, who the general population calls the author of *Sherlock Holmes*.” She bowed and everyone clapped.

What does she mean by the general population calling him the author of Sherlock Holmes? I tilted my head in confusion, as did the other guests.

She giggled, perhaps sensing our thoughts. “We Sherlockians consider Watson to be the storyteller of Holmes’s deeds. We see Doyle as a proxy that worked with the publisher.”

“Oh,” the guests said, nodding. One of them timidly raised their hand and asked, “Um, I once heard that Sherlockians get upset if you pronounce it like ‘Waht-son’ instead of ‘Wot-son’...”

The members exchanged looks and laughed, shaking their heads.

“Don’t worry, that’s just a matter of accents.”

“Right. People pronounce it different ways depending on where they grew up.”

“I’m not sure about other Sherlockians, but here at the WJSHC, we accept both pronunciations.”

The guests nodded, looking relieved. It seemed that the people here were very open-minded.

“Now then, back to the topic,” the wife continued. “I’d like to talk about the ‘publisher proxy’ Conan Doyle, known to the masses as the creator of Sherlock Holmes, and what the public knows about him. As I’m sure many of you are aware of, Doyle was an ophthalmologist. He

opened his office in March 1891.”

“Oh?” The guests murmured, including me. *I vaguely knew that he was a doctor, but I didn't know he was an eye doctor.*

“Doyle rented a room at 23 Montague Place, where he lived while working at his office from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. However, he never got a single patient, so he had time to write on the side. Doyle had been writing stories and sending them to publishers ever since he was a student, but he had no success. He was absolutely confident in his historical novels and *A Study in Scarlet*, which the publishers did buy, but they didn't make waves at the time.”

That was surprising to me because I'd assumed that the *Holmes* series had been popular from the start.

“Doyle stopped writing for a time after opening his office, but one day, he caught influenza. His narrow escape from death made him realize that he truly wanted to write after all, and so he took up the pen again. He wrote a series of short stories about his existing protagonist, Holmes, planning to send them to a general-interest monthly magazine called the *Strand Magazine*. His plan was a brilliant success, and the editor-in-chief paid him thirty-five pounds for each story. That was how Doyle's career took off... Public speaking is a bit nerve-racking for me, so I'll let my husband take over now.” The wife sat down, placing her hand on her chest in relief.

The husband smiled cheerfully and stood up. “Allow me to continue, then.” Everyone clapped again. “Doyle successfully signed an agreement with the *Strand Magazine*. The first story in the series, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, was published in the July issue of the magazine. This one was wildly popular from the get-go. The six stories were published monthly. August was *The Red-Headed League*, September was *A Case of Identity*, and after that came *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, *The Five Orange Pips*, and *The Man with the Twisted Lip*. The incredible popularity of the series brought Doyle both fame and wealth. However, the state of his clinic hadn't changed, so he quit the medical field a mere three months after opening the office, becoming a full-time writer. In short, the *Holmes* series wasn't popular from the very beginning. It only saw success after the *Strand Magazine* picked it up.”

The guests watched the husband with interest, while the members nodded in affirmation.

“However, Doyle himself wanted to write full-blown historical novels. The publisher and the readers craved more *Holmes* content, and all of the offers that came his way were for the *Holmes* series. No matter how many times he declined them, they just kept coming. In order to force the publisher to give up, he said, ‘If you pay me one thousand pounds, I'll write twelve more *Holmes* stories.’ It was a

ridiculous price—adjusted for inflation, around twenty-five million yen today. He assumed the publisher would leave him alone after that, but they gladly paid up. Thus, Doyle was forced to write more *Holmes*.”

“Wow...” we murmured.

“Then, Doyle thought, ‘Even when I finish writing these, the persistent offers are still going to continue. I want to write *other* things. Oh, I know—I’ll kill off Holmes.’ That is why, in *The Final Problem*, Holmes and Professor Moriarty fall into the depths of the Reichenbach Falls...” the husband said in a sad tone.

I knew that Holmes was thought to be dead after falling into a waterfall with his archenemy, Professor Moriarty, but I didn’t know it had that kind of backstory.

“Doyle thought he’d be free from the relentless offers after that, but instead he was faced with an unimaginable number of complaints and extreme reactions. A funeral for Holmes was held in front of his house, and he received threats saying he’d be killed if he didn’t revive Holmes.”

That’s insane. I gulped.

“Nevertheless, Doyle refrained from writing *Holmes* for the next eight years.” He sighed.

Maybe the excessive desire for more Holmes only made Doyle even more stubborn.

“However, after eight years, he wrote a new *Holmes* story—*The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Perhaps he caved to the pressure. This story didn’t mean that Holmes was revived though—it took place before the Reichenbach Falls scene. The readers rejoiced and rejoiced, while also grieving that it didn’t confirm that Holmes was alive.”

I can understand how the fans felt. They were happy to be able to read a new story, but the fact that he died didn’t change. The more interesting the story, the sadder they’d feel.

“Between the tempting offers, the readers’ desire for Holmes’s revival, and his mother’s advice, Doyle must’ve decided that he had no choice but to give the people what they wanted. He brought Holmes back to life in a new story called *The Adventure of the Empty House*. Ten years had passed since *The Final Problem*. When I imagine how happy the fans must’ve been at the time, I feel joy as well. Now that I’m an adult, I do understand how Doyle felt. But as a fan, I’m still grateful that he brought the *Holmes* series back. That said, we still consider Watson to be the real author. Doyle was a proxy.” He grinned mischievously.

The wife stood up and said, “That concludes our story of Conan Doyle, the publisher proxy.” The couple bowed, and everyone applauded.

Creators might all go through the same things, no matter the era. Works that don't see the light of day could soar under a different publisher. What an author wants to write doesn't necessarily match what the readers want from them. And regardless of how the creator feels, the fans will wait endlessly for their work, to the point of shedding tears... I clapped, moved by the struggles that both sides went through.

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Uchiumi," Azuma said. "Does anyone have any questions for them, or anything to add to the topic?" She looked around at the audience. "Umm, I know I'm the emcee, but do you mind if I tell another story?" she asked hesitantly.

"Go ahead," everyone encouraged her.

Azuma cleared her throat and said, "The Uchiumis told us about how Doyle once killed Holmes and eventually revived him. Personally, I love Holmes's revival story, *The Adventure of the Empty House*. If any of our guests have read it, could you please raise your hands?"

The guests looked around at each other and shrank in their seats. Only a few people raised their hands—I wasn't one of them.

"Ah, there's no need to be ashamed," said Azuma with a smile. "The people who haven't read it must be interested in how Holmes came back after falling into the waterfall with Moriarty, right?"

The guests nodded. I certainly was interested.

"In that case, allow me to tell you about *The Adventure of the Empty House*. The story takes place three years after Holmes fell into the waterfall—despite being released ten years later, the setting is only three years later. Holmes's best friend, Watson, has divorced his wife and now lives a lonesome life. One day, Watson comes across a murder case. He tries to copy Holmes and solve it, but has no idea who the culprit could've been. He visits the house where the murder took place and runs into an old man, knocking the man's books to the ground. Watson picks up the books and apologizes, but the man snaps at him and leaves. Watson returns home without making any progress in the case, but the old man visits him to apologize for his earlier behavior. The man introduces himself as a local bookseller. He looks at the bookshelf behind Watson, says, 'That shelf looks empty,' and offers to sell him some of his books. Watson turns around to look at the shelf, and when he turns back, the old man has been replaced with Holmes, who was supposed to be dead. That's right—Holmes was disguised as the old man. Watson is so shocked that he literally faints. I adore this story because it's overflowing with Watson's love for Holmes," Azuma said in a somewhat excited tone. The members nodded in agreement.

But as someone who hadn't read it, I wanted to know *why* Holmes was alive after supposedly falling into the waterfall and dying. *And if he was alive, then why did he hide himself for three years?*

One of the guests raised their hand and asked timidly, “I do plan on reading it soon, but I still want to know... How did Holmes survive?”

“It was thought that Holmes fell into the Reichenbach Falls with Moriarty, but it was actually only Moriarty who fell. Holmes knew ‘baritsu,’ a fictional Japanese martial art, and used it to toss Moriarty into the falls. It’s unknown exactly what kind of martial art ‘baritsu’ was supposed to be, but at any rate, it was a Japanese combat technique and he didn’t fall in himself. However, there were many people who were targeting his life, including Moriarty’s henchmen. In order to shake off his pursuers, he pretended to die and concealed himself by traveling around the world. Well, I won’t spoil it any further than that. This is where Holmes’s story begins again, and as Uchiumi said, the fans at the time must’ve been incredibly moved. I wish I could’ve lived in that era— Ah, sorry, I’m getting heated up. That’s all from me. Thank you for listening.” Azuma bowed.

Everyone smiled and clapped. *Have they rubbed off on me? For some reason, I feel like reading a Holmes book as soon as I get home today.*

4

“Now then, I think we should take a break before moving on to the item showcase and auction,” said the emcee. “Tea has been prepared, so please make yourself at home. The restroom is outside to the right.”

Everyone got up and stretched. Some people left to go to the restroom.

“Aoi, has their enthusiasm put you off?” Holmes asked, peering into my face.

“Not at all.” I shook my head. “I thought I knew *Sherlock Holmes* after watching some movies and reading a few books, but there’s actually a lot I don’t know, so it was very interesting. It’s also kind of charming how much everyone loves him.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I’ve read *A Study in Scarlet*, but I don’t remember it that well. What does the ‘Scarlet’ in the title mean in the first place?”

“Ah, apparently in the West, the color scarlet represents ‘sin’ or ‘crime.’”

“Oh, I see.”

As Holmes and I were talking, the butler, Nishizawa, rushed over to us and said, “Holmes, I need a favor.”

“Yes?”

“Can you change into this outfit?” She showed us the hat and

beige coat she was clutching to her chest.

"These are...a deerstalker hat and an Inverness coat, right? A Holmes outfit?"

"Yes, Madam and I are submitting this Holmes costume to the auction. It'll look better if a handsome young man wears it, right?"

"In other words, you're telling me to cosplay as Holmes." Holmes grimaced.

"Why wouldn't you? You're the WJSHC's very own Holmes! Besides, you said earlier that I could ask you for anything, right?" She pouted.

Holmes chuckled, resigning himself to his fate. "All right. I'm your handmaid today, so I'll wear it." He tried to take the coat and hat from her, but she started walking, saying, "It's okay, I'll hold it. Come with me to the back room outside the hall."

Sugiura, who had been listening to the conversation, leaned in, a twinkle in his eyes. "Holmes is gonna cosplay Holmes, huh? If he doesn't want to, I don't mind taking his place!"

"That won't do," Nishizawa quickly retorted. "If Holmes is Sherlock, then you have to stand next to him as Watson."

"What?!" Sugiura exclaimed. "I-I'm offended. My initials are S.H., you know? I'm the WJSHC's other Holmes!"

The people nearby burst out laughing.

"Aoi, please wait here," Holmes said.

"Okay." I nodded. *Holmes is going to cosplay Sherlock. I'm kind of excited to see it.*

I watched Holmes leave the hall with Nishizawa. Not knowing what to do by myself, I flipped through the pamphlet I'd received when we checked in.

"The tea and cakes are ready," Akashi announced.

"Please come to the long table next to the wall," Azuma added.

I looked up from the pamphlet. *Since I'm here, I might as well.* I stood up and headed over with the other guests.

Wedgwood cups and saucers were laid out on the table, along with small tea cakes, scones, and cookies—some of which had probably been brought by the other members. The two receptionists were pouring drinks for people. I accepted a cup of black tea while admiring the assortment of English snacks. I gently lifted the cup to my mouth, feeling nervous about the expensive china. "Oh, this is delicious," I murmured.

Madam, who was nearby, smiled happily and said, "I'm glad to hear that. It's my favorite variety of tea."

"Is the tea Wedgwood too?" I asked.

"Yes, I was a big fan of England before I became a *Sherlock Holmes* fan. There was originally a Japanese-style house on this lot, but when

we bought it, I asked my husband if we could change everything to English style, and he went along with my unreasonable request.”

Oh, so this was originally a Japanese-style house, but her husband had it rebuilt as an English-style manor. And judging from her accent, she might’ve moved here from outside Kansai.

“Oh, Sugiura, can you open the curtains?” Akashi asked, pointing at the bright red curtains surrounding the makeshift fitting room.

“It’s already time, huh? All right.” Sugiura nodded and walked over. He spun the reel that was attached to the curtains and they swiftly rose up, revealing a three-tiered round table. Various items were arranged on it, including the Russian film reel, a teddy bear wearing a Sherlock Holmes costume, wine glasses with “S.H.” engraved into them, and Holmes pin badges. There were also framed prints of paintings.

I think these paintings are... “Vernet and Greuze?” I murmured.

“Huh, no wonder you work at Kura,” Sugiura said, impressed.

“Yep, these posters are paintings by the French artists Horace Vernet and Jean-Baptiste Greuze.”

“Um, why are they with the Holmes items?” I tilted my head.

Matsuda, who was standing nearby, came over and said, “Sherlock Holmes’s grandmother was Vernet’s younger sister.”

“H-Hey, I was going to explain that!” Sugiura said, panicking. “Don’t swoop in and steal my good deeds.”

“Good deeds?” Matsuda laughed. “While we’re at it, the Greuze painting is because Professor Moriarty collected his works.”

“You did it again!” Sugiura facepalmed.

I giggled at them and looked at the posters. *Maybe it’s because of these detailed character backgrounds that the fans feel like Sherlock Holmes was a real person.*

I looked back at the table and noticed a brown envelope labeled “Sashihara — View-only.” Whatever was inside must’ve been what he bought at the auction in America. *What could it be?* I wondered briefly, before my love for cute mascots pulled my attention back to the teddy bear wearing the Sherlock Holmes costume. It was really cute. I didn’t want to say that out loud though, because knowing Holmes, he’d probably be considerate and bid on it for me.

“Wh-What’s that?!” Azuma shrieked. “Look!” She pointed outside.

Everyone looked out the window and squinted, not realizing immediately why Azuma had screamed. Because of the flowers in the way, it took me some time to realize too—but when I did, I was shocked as well, and shouted, “Th-The cherry blossom tree!” A large branch had fallen to the ground.

“Wh-Why?!” Madam exclaimed, bewildered. Her face was pale.

The cherry blossom tree was perfectly fine earlier. How could such a

large branch fall without making a sound?

Confused, we went out to the garden. There was a white sheet of paper nailed to the tree trunk that wasn't there before. The paper had drawings of stick figures in strange poses—most of them were holding up their arms, and one of them was upside down. There were seven in total, and it almost looked like they were making fun of us. I frowned at them suspiciously.

"Th-The dancing men..." the members murmured, faces pale.

"The dancing men?" I repeated.

Sugiura gulped and nodded. "Y-Yes, *The Dancing Men* is the title of one of the short stories in the collection *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. In the story, the stick figures—dancing men—are a cryptogram."

"Holmes solved it using frequency analysis of letters in the alphabet," Matsuda added.

"So this is some kind of code?" I asked, looking at the stick men again.



Okawara, the lawyer, walked to the front of the group and frowned. "I guess we should decipher this. The second from the left and the third from the right are the same. So are the third from the left and the two rightmost ones."

"The ones on the right are 'S,'" Sugiura said. "I remember that one because I've written my initials with the dancing men before."

Which gives us "_ _ S _ _ S S."

"The upside-down one at the start is 'D,' I believe," Matsuda added, placing his hand on his chin. "The word 'GOD' comes up in *The Dancing Men*, and I remember the last man being upside down."

"D _ S _ _ S S."

"The matching pair is 'I,'" Akashi continued. "I've also written my name, 'Aimi,' with the dancing men before."

I probably shouldn't have been surprised by anything anymore, but it was still astonishing that these people even wrote their names with the code from the story.

Anyway, "D I S _ I S S."

Okawara sighed and put his hand on his forehead. "Looks like we have our answer. The middle letter is 'M,' making the word 'DISMISS.' In other words..."

"It's telling us to disperse," Matsuda said in a low voice. Everyone fell silent.

Someone broke a branch off of Madam's precious cherry tree and

stuck a message on the trunk with dancing men telling us to “dismiss.” Why would someone be so cruel?

No one spoke a word as we stared at the cherry blossom tree for a while.

Suddenly, Madam burst into tears. “How could someone do this? I know it was selfish of me to ask to hold the party here... I knew you would’ve rather held the commemorative meeting in a grand hotel. Maybe it was arrogant of me to ask just because I couldn’t attend otherwise. But this tree is a memento of my husband! How could you break something so precious? How could you put such a crude message on it?” She looked down, covering her face with her hands.

Akashi put her hand on Madam’s back and said, “That’s not true, Madam! We don’t think you’re selfish.”

Madam’s sobs rang out across the quiet garden.

“She’s right, Madam,” Sugiura added. “Some people did think it was inconvenient, but we’re all happy to be able to use such a nice house.” *Sugiura’s a really honest person. Even though he’s trying to console her, he still admitted that some people thought it was an inconvenient location.*

“Who would do such a thing in the first place?” Matsuda asked, crossing his arms. The tree had been fine up until the party started. No one left their seat during the speeches either. So it must’ve happened during the break.

“The people who left the hall were President Hiraoka, Makabe, and Sashihara, right?” Azuma put her hand on her chin as she spoke, digging through her memory.

“Holmes and Nishizawa too,” added the Uchiumi couple in unison.

None of the people listed were here with us. Meanwhile, Madam was still looking at the ground. The guests were standing farther back, faces pale.

Akashi grimaced as if she couldn’t take it anymore. “What do they even mean by ‘dismiss’? Are they telling us to break up the party? Or the WJSHC as a whole?”

“Either way, they must be unhappy with the way we’re doing things, right?” someone commented.

Everyone fell silent again. It seemed like they were coming up with suspects in their heads.

“What if it’s President Hiraoka? He’s always saying, ‘It was nice how much more active this club was in the past.’ Maybe he’s not satisfied with us now.”

“What about Makabe, who’s in the London club too? He might think we’re too casual compared to the one over there.”

“Oh, and Holmes. He’s a nice guy, but I can’t help but think he’s

hiding something. I can't tell what he's really thinking."

"W-Wait!" I shouted, taken aback. "It's true that Holmes is blackhearted, extremely two-faced, suspicious in some ways, and wicked at times. But he'd never harm someone's treasure, and he'd never do something so evil!"

Everyone gasped and stopped talking. A cheerful voice came from behind me, saying, "Thank you, Aoi. But as always, that was a bit harsh."

I whirled around and saw Holmes wearing the Inverness coat and deerstalker hat. He was also holding a pipe. *After changing into the Holmes costume, he must've returned to the hall only to see that no one was there. Then he came outside looking for us.* The Sherlock Holmes cosplay suited him so well that everyone, members and guests alike, stared at him in awe, forgetting about the argument.

Behind Holmes were Nishizawa the butler, President Hiraoka, Makabe, and Professor Sashihara. They gaped at the scene, clearly wondering what happened.

"Madam's precious tree had a branch broken off, and a cryptogram of dancing men was stuck to the trunk," I explained.

Holmes silently walked up to the tree. After inspecting the paper nailed to the trunk, he crouched to look at the branch on the ground. I looked down at it again too. The fallen branch was cut diagonally, but part of it was jagged, as if it'd been broken off. It seemed like the culprit partially cut it with a saw first, and then pulled it off of the tree.

"Aoi, can you tell me everything you saw in the hall while I was gone?" Holmes asked, standing up.

"O-Okay." I nodded.

5

As I was relaying to Holmes everything I'd seen, the club members inspected the cryptogram and the tree branch. There was a solemn mood in the air, as if we were at a crime scene investigation.

Madam, who'd been hanging her head until now, suddenly wailed, "Stop! Let's just call off the party!"

"Madam..." Nishizawa, the butler, walked up to her with a sad look on her face. She then turned to everyone with a stern expression and declared, "I cannot believe that someone would harm Madam's precious cherry blossom tree and nail such an insulting message to it. Sorry, but please go home, everyone."

Everyone exchanged looks and nodded in understanding.

"I-It's gone!" came Professor Sashihara's voice from the hall.

"What?" someone asked.

We all ran to the hall to see Professor Sashihara standing frozen in shock. He was holding the brown envelope containing what he'd acquired in America.

"It's empty," he said, his face pale.

Madam's tree was damaged, a malicious note was left, and Professor Sashihara's "view-only" auction prize was gone. All of us stood still, lost for words.

"I see," Holmes said. "Now it's clear—the culprit caused this commotion so that they could steal Professor Sashihara's treasure." He looked around the hall, sighed, and crossed his arms.

"Sashihara, what did you bring?" President Hiraoka asked quietly.

"Documents inside a clear plastic sleeve," Professor Sashihara answered. "Even the sleeve is gone."

"This must've been the work of a member, not a guest!" Hiraoka exclaimed. "All of the members are still here. We can check everyone's belongings to find out who stole your treasure. Everyone, show us your bags!"

The club members voluntarily opened their bags. Nishizawa and Sugiura checked the contents.

Holmes frowned. "I doubt a search will reveal anything. This was a carefully thought-out plan."

"Does that mean it's already been hidden?" someone asked.

"More importantly, who cut the tree, and how?" pressed another.

"Well," Holmes began. "First, I'd like to focus on who cut the tree branch."

Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen to him.

"The tree was fine up until I left the hall to change into this costume. In other words, if my memory serves me correctly, we can assume that the branch was broken after I left."

The guests looked doubtful about whether Holmes's memory could be trusted, but the members didn't object. They probably knew exactly how good it was.

"Nishizawa and I went to the back room, where I got changed behind a screen. She didn't leave during that time. Meanwhile, President Hiraoka, Makabe, and Professor Sashihara seemed to be engaged in enthusiastic conversation in the corridor after using the restroom. Were you there the entire time?" Holmes asked.

President Hiraoka, Makabe, and Professor Sashihara all said, "Yes," nodding firmly.

"C-Couldn't they have snuck around to the garden from the corridor?" Sugiura asked hesitantly.

Nishizawa smiled wryly and shook her head. "Today, the doors were locked so that only the hall, corridor, and restrooms were accessible. There aren't any windows in the corridor, and the restroom

windows are so small that not even a child could fit through them.”

“Now that you mention it, the room that I changed in was originally locked too,” Holmes remarked. “All of the other rooms were locked to keep people to the garden, hall, and restroom, right?”

“Yes,” Nishizawa answered.

“As for the hall, from what Aoi told me, no one went outside until Azuma noticed the fallen branch and screamed,” Holmes continued.

“Yeah.” Everyone nodded.

“However, there was one person who did something slightly unusual.” Holmes walked up to the table holding the auction prizes and turned around to face us.

“Something unusual?” Everyone looked confused.

“Yes. I believe that that person cut down the tree branch without going outside.”

“H-How could they do that without going outside?” President Hiraoka looked around the hall, bewildered.

“The one who did it was...”

Everyone gulped and waited for his next words. The atmosphere was unbelievably tense.

“...you, Sugiura.” Holmes pointed at Sugiura.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaa?!” Sugiura pointed at himself, his eyes wide open. “W-Wait, I did no such thing! I don’t even know how I could do that without leaving the hall.”

“Indeed, you did it unknowingly.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Holmes!” Sugiura held his head in his hands.

Holmes placed his hand on the reel attached to the makeshift fitting room. “Aoi told me that you turned this reel to open the curtains.”

“Y-Yeah, and?”

“This incident made use of this fitting room where the auction items are kept. The cherry tree branch appeared to have been notched in advance—a diagonal incision on the underside, likely made by a saw. Then, piano wire was strung from the branch to the pulley on the ceiling of this fitting room, passing by the light posts and whatnot in between. The piano wire was wrapped around the pulley so that when someone rotated this reel, the wire would be pulled in, breaking the tree branch. The flags in the garden prevented the wire from being noticed.”

“O-Oh, so that’s why it took so much force to turn it. I thought it must’ve been rusty.” Sugiura’s eyes widened and he leaned forward. “That means it was only me by chance, right?” he implored.

“Yes, it just happened to be you. I imagine the ‘dancing men’ cryptogram was nailed onto the tree before the party but after

everyone had entered the hall. No outsider could've possibly pulled off this level of preparation."

Everyone gasped.

After a pause, Holmes turned and said, "Nishizawa," looking at the butler.

Nishizawa flinched.

"You said to Sugiura, 'I make sure not to carry things when there's a man around.' However, when I tried to carry this costume that I'm wearing right now, you didn't let me. Why was that?"

Nishizawa gasped, averted her gaze, and bit her lip.

"Were you hiding something under the costume in your hands?" Holmes continued.

Everyone looked surprised.

"Th-That means Sashihara's documents are..." President Hiraoka trailed off, eyes wide in disbelief.

Holmes nodded. "Yes, Nishizawa has them."

Everyone blinked in shock and looked at Nishizawa, who was casting her eyes down with a grave expression on her face.

"Nishizawa," Holmes continued. "When you brought me this costume from the fitting room, you'd already removed Professor Sashihara's documents from the envelope. Then you went with me to the back room and hid the documents while I was changing behind the partition."

"So my documents are in the back room?" Professor Sashihara exclaimed.

"They could be, but I don't think so. It's possible that the room would've been searched after the documents were discovered to be missing."

"Where are they, then?"

Everyone furrowed their brows.

Holmes looked at Nishizawa's kimono. "Nishizawa, I'm guessing you hid the clear plastic sleeve inside your kimono sash. Am I wrong?" He leaned forward slightly.

Nishizawa looked down with a pained face.

Madam came towards us, wheeling her wheelchair. "Please don't blame her, Holmes. I asked her to do this. I'm the mastermind." She stopped next to Nishizawa.

Everyone blinked in confusion.

Madam cast her eyes down and explained, "Since I was one of the organizers, I knew in advance what Professor Sashihara was bringing. When I found out, my heart throbbed—I wanted it oh so badly. So I asked Nishizawa to help me. I was actually lying when I said that the cherry blossom tree was my treasure. My husband did cherish it though. When we moved here, I said I wanted to cut it down so that

we could make an English garden. My husband got angry at me, even though he was normally kind. I do like cherry blossoms, but I really didn't like having that tree in my lovely English garden. But then I had an evil thought—"If I call it my treasure, a branch breaking off will cause a stir, right?" Sashihara, and everyone else, I'm truly sorry." Madam bowed deeply.

Professor Sashihara shook his head and said gently, "Ah, well, as a fellow Sherlockian, I know painfully well how you felt." He placed his hand on her shoulder.

Despite his response, the hall was filled with an awkward tension.

Suddenly, Holmes clapped his hands loudly and said, "Madam, that was a spectacular performance. Everyone else too."

"Huh?" Everyone's eyes widened.

"This was a short play that the WJSHC put on for our guests. That's why I'm wearing this costume. Right, Sugiura?" Holmes glanced at Sugiura.

"Oh, uh, y-yeah! We call it 'The Case of the Cherry Tree Branch.' Did you enjoy it?" Sugiura continued, flustered.

The members exchanged looks and nodded. They stood in a row and bowed as if they were performing a curtain call.

The shaken guests quickly brightened up and cheered, breaking out in applause.

"W-Wow, that was exciting!"

"I should've known it was an act when they used a pulley and reel to cut down the branch!"

"It's just like a Sherlock Holmes club to do this!"

The applause got louder. Madam and Nishizawa looked bewildered and bowed deeply, seeming sincerely apologetic.

"I really am sorry," Madam said again.

"Also, here..." Nishizawa took the plastic sleeve out of her kimono sash.

"Professor Sashihara, can you tell us what this darn treasure is already?" Okawara asked impatiently.

"Oh dear," Professor Sashihara said with a laugh, taking the plastic sleeve from Nishizawa. "Last month, I visited a friend who lives in America. He invited me to an auction that was being held for the estate of a millionaire who passed away. Initially, I only attended out of mild curiosity. The deceased had a wide range of interests and collected paintings, antiques, jewelry, old books, and various other works of art. However, the family wasn't interested in those things and wanted money instead. At that auction, there was an unpublished Conan Doyle manuscript."

Everyone's eyes lit up—not just the members, but the guests as well.

“A-An unpublished Doyle manuscript?” a guest exclaimed in disbelief. “Is that even possible?”

“It sounds unbelievable, but there really is a Doyle manuscript that went missing,” Professor Sashihara explained. “It’s called *The Narrative of John Smith*, and it’s not part of the *Holmes* series. He mailed it to the publisher, but it went missing before it was delivered. Well, a rewritten version was published later on, but anyway—the sellers were as skeptical as you all are. I doubted the manuscript’s authenticity too, but when I looked at it, I was stunned to see that it was written on nineteenth-century paper in Doyle’s handwriting.”

“He studies historical texts,” Holmes added.

“Oh?” everyone murmured.

Professor Sashihara shrugged, embarrassed. “Yes, that’s right. I don’t appraise antiques like Yagashira Holmes does, but I do something similar for old manuscripts. You’d be surprised how interesting historical documents can be—to give an example, in 16th- and 17th-century England, unlawful publications were printed in other countries in order to avoid government censorship. Some of these were marked ‘Printed in London’ as a way of provoking the government, and even historians are occasionally fooled by them. In order to determine where they were printed, we examine the way they were printed. Extremely poor quality printing was done in London, while clean printing work came from the Netherlands. Back then, England’s printing technique was behind the times, so they couldn’t produce high-quality work. So if you come across high-quality printing that’s marked ‘Printed in London,’ you should suspect that it was actually printed in the Netherlands, which had the advanced technique. We can also glean much information from the paper. This is touched upon in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, where paper transparency becomes a major clue—”

President Hiraoka raised his hand and said apologetically, “Sashihara, this is all very interesting, but could you continue this later? Sorry to interrupt, but we want to hear about the Doyle manuscript right now.”

“Right, my bad. Back to what I was saying.” Professor Sashihara grinned cheekily. “As you can see, I work with old documents, so when I saw the auctioned manuscript’s paper, I thought, ‘What if?’ However, if I stated right then and there that it could be authentic, then the price would immediately skyrocket. Instead, I said, ‘I’m a Sherlockian, so I want it even if it’s not real’ and won the bid. Fortunately there weren’t any other Holmes fans at the auction.” He placed his hand on his chest, letting out a sigh of relief. “This manuscript is an unfinished story about Holmes’s comeback. If it’s real, then it could be a scrapped story that was written before *The*

Adventure of the Empty House. However, even I couldn't help but be skeptical, so I wanted to have Yagashira Holmes take a look at it. He's an appraiser, after all."

I nodded, finally understanding the situation. The club members exchanged glances, as if sympathizing with Professor Sashihara's desperation to get his hands on an unpublished *Sherlock Holmes* manuscript.

"May I take a look now, then?" Holmes asked, walking up to Professor Sashihara and holding out his hand. He was wearing his white appraisal gloves.

"Please do." Professor Sashihara handed him the clear plastic sleeve.

"I was shown pictures of this manuscript ahead of time," Holmes said, carefully taking the faded pages out of the sleeve. *That must be what the QR code earlier was for*. He looked at the manuscript and frowned with a knowing look. "It's the spitting image of Doyle's handwriting, but it's an imitation."

"Which means...?"

"It's fake," Holmes declared.

"I see." Professor Sashihara slumped his shoulders.

"Wait, you can't write it off so quickly," Sugiura said, leaning in. "The handwriting is identical, right?"

"Yes, and when I was looking at the pictures earlier, I read through the story," said Holmes. "It takes place three months after Holmes fell into the Reichenbach Falls. Watson can't believe that his superhuman friend would die like that, so he comes up with a work-related excuse to go to Switzerland and look for him. He hears that someone bearing a close resemblance to Holmes was spotted in a Swiss village and immediately rushes over. Sure enough, Holmes is there—but he has amnesia. Watson asks around and discovers that an elderly couple found him at the riverbank and rescued him. When he regained consciousness, he had no memories. The elderly couple had just lost their son, so they took Holmes in and treated him like their own son."

"Ah," the audience murmured.

"Even without memories, Holmes is as perceptive as ever. The moment he sees Watson, he successfully guesses that he's a doctor and says, 'I know you were once my friend.' Watson is happy to be reunited with Holmes, but at the same time, he's sad that he's been forgotten. He considers staying with Holmes for a while to try and cure his amnesia. One day, Holmes declares that the elderly couple's son's death wasn't an accident—it was murder. As he's explaining the case, the culprit grabs him by the collar and slams his head against the wall. Holmes crouches on the ground, and when he lifts his head back

up, he has a different look in his eyes—his memories have returned. Watson immediately senses that the old Holmes is back. Upon seeing Watson, Holmes says, ‘Hello, Watson. Long time no see.’ Watson tears up and says, ‘Welcome back, Holmes.’ It’s an exciting, emotional scene, right? Then Holmes proceeds to solve the case with his usual sharp wit, and the manuscript ends there.”

“Ahh,” the audience murmured. Some of them placed their hands on their foreheads, as if lamenting that the story wasn’t canon.

“The reason why I think this manuscript is fake is that the handwriting contains no sign of emotion. For example, the scene where Holmes regains his memories—normally, a writer’s excitement would show in their handwriting at least a little bit. However, the handwriting in this manuscript is completely the same throughout. The writer was suppressing their emotions and concentrating on replicating Doyle’s penmanship. In other words, they likely wrote this story elsewhere first, and when they were done, they copied it in Doyle’s handwriting. This is a very arduous, time-consuming task. But even though the story would’ve been complete, this manuscript isn’t, which implies that they stopped during the copying stage. Do you know what this means?” Holmes asked, looking at us.

Azuma tilted her head. “The person died?” she said quietly.

“That’s certainly a possibility. Another one is that they didn’t need to finish the manuscript anymore.”

Everyone’s eyes widened in realization.

One of the members clapped and said, “Because...Doyle revived Holmes?”

Holmes nodded. “Yes. I suspect that a zealous Sherlockian decided that if they couldn’t read more *Holmes*, they’d write their own revival story. I doubt they wanted to deceive the public—it’d be akin to what we call fanfiction these days. People have been exhibiting their talents through derivative works all throughout history. I believe that the writer wrote this manuscript for their own satisfaction. However, since Doyle revived Holmes, they didn’t care about their own fanfiction anymore. I’m sure they picked up *The Adventure of the Empty House* with joy. In conclusion, this is a derivative work written by someone who loved Holmes very much,” Holmes explained, holding the manuscript with care.

“Ohhh,” everyone said, nodding.

“I see,” Sashihara said. “If that’s the case, then I don’t regret bidding on it. But I would’ve liked to read the ending too.” He sounded slightly sad.

“Same,” everyone else agreed, chuckling.

After that, the auction went smoothly. Naturally, bids started at 221 yen. Everyone loved Holmes's costume. There were Sherlock Holmes quiz tournaments too, one for the guests and one for the club members. The members' rabid enthusiasm was both fearsome and hilarious. Prizes and souvenirs were handed out, lots of delicious cakes, cookies, and scones were had, and the commemorative 221st Assembly of the West Japan Sherlock Holmes Club came to an end.

"Thanks for bringing me here today, Holmes," I said. "I had a lot of fun." I bowed, holding a teddy bear in a Sherlock costume snugly in my arms.

When the auction began, the members said that Holmes could buy any one of the items for a flat 2,221 yen, as a reward for his efforts.

"I'll take you up on that offer, then," he said. He picked up the teddy bear and handed it to me, saying, "This is for you, Aoi."

I accepted it, surprised, confused, and grateful all at the same time. "Th-Thank you." I bowed. Holmes must've sensed that I wanted it.

"Thanks so much for today, Holmes," Sugiura said, grabbing Holmes's hand and shaking it vigorously. "We managed to end the party on a peaceful note because of you."

President Hiraoka and the other club members nodded in agreement.

"Not at all," Holmes replied. "You did well too, Sugiura, quickly going along with my sudden act."

"Nah, it was no big deal." Sugiura scratched his head bashfully.

Okawara suddenly burst out laughing, as though he just recalled what happened. "Man, 'The Case of the Cherry Tree Branch' was an awful name."

"Hey, that's just rude!" Sugiura shouted angrily. "I couldn't come up with a good title on the spot. I'd like to see you come up with something better."

"Hmm." President Hiraoka folded his arms. "How about 'A Motive in Scarlet'?"

"Ooh!" the members exclaimed.

"I admit defeat," Sugiura said, placing his hand on his forehead. Everyone burst out laughing.

We all bowed and left the Mamiya manor. After passing through the gate, we turned back and saw Madam sitting in her wheelchair, looking at us. Upon making eye contact, she bowed deeply. We bowed back.

"They were really lenient, huh?" I murmured as Holmes and I walked to the parking area. *Madam caused such a commotion just because she really wanted the manuscript, but the club forgave her and made the party a success.*

“As Professor Sashihara said, fellow fans and collectors can sympathize with her,” Holmes replied. “I don’t have much of a collector’s mindset myself, but if there were really an unpublished *Holmes* manuscript, I’d do anything to read it.”

“In other words, you’re like comrades, right?”

“Yes, you could say that.” Holmes nodded.

“They were all great people,” I said. “Fan gatherings are fun, huh? I want to try reading the *Holmes* series now, starting from *A Study in Scarlet*. I’d like to attend another meeting after reading them.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Let’s attend again sometime.”

“Okay.”

We looked at each other and smiled before resuming our walk to the car.

Chapter 3: Purple Clouds

1

This story began over a month ago, at the end of February when spring was still far off. The Japan Professional Football League had just opened, and my school, Oki High, was extremely excited. Everyone was talking about it, and there was even a celebratory banner hanging from the school building. *I can understand people talking about soccer, but why did the school put up a banner for it? Plus, people weren't talking about soccer this much last year.*

Confused, I walked into class. Everyone was talking about soccer again.

“Um, why is everyone so excited?” I asked hesitantly.

My classmates exchanged looks and giggled.

“Oh right, Mashiro doesn't know,” one of them said.

“We normally cheer for our local team, the Kyoto Sanga FC, but this year is a bit special,” said another.

“Special?” I asked, tilting my head.

My classmates leaned in, eager to explain.

“An alumnus from Oki High is part of the Kyoto Sanga FC.”

“Yeah. He's mainly been a reserve player, but he did well during a substitution last year, so people are expecting a lot from him now.”

“Take a look.”

I was shown a lavender pamphlet that said “SANGA TIMES” in purple text. It was the Kyoto Sanga FC's free newspaper. I opened it and saw a photo of a tanned young soccer player with short brown hair scoring a goal.

Name: Makoto Ichijo (20 years old)

Birthday: May 3

Blood Type: A

Height / Weight: 179 cm / 75 kg

Birthplace / Alma Mater: Kyoto City / Oki High School

Position: FW

Dominant Foot: Right

An exceptional runner and a powerful scorer. We're expecting a lot from him this season!

“Huh, it really does say ‘Oki High School,’” I remarked. Ichijo was twenty years old, so no one in my class would've known him personally. Despite that, they were still happy to see a senior from

their school in the spotlight.

His birthday is May 3rd... That's the same as mine. Now I felt an affinity with him, but I kept it to myself.

"Yeah! He's pretty good-looking too," someone added.

On the next page there was a portrait of him with a toothy smile. He was the cute type rather than handsome. He gave the impression of a mischievous boy, and he definitely fit the image of a young soccer player. He looked younger than his actual age.

"For us, it's cool to see our senior doing well in the pro league, and the teachers are excited too."

"They are?" I asked.

"The teacher in charge of our year is the soccer club's advisor, and he really loves soccer. Then again, Ichijo wasn't even in Oki High's soccer club. He was in Sanga's training school."

"Mr. Suzuki, the math teacher, and Ms. Hayakawa, the classical literature teacher, are always nervous on game days."

"Wait, they are?" I blinked in surprise. Mr. Suzuki was a man in his early thirties with his hair parted on one side. He always wore glasses and a tight-fitting suit, and he exuded the aura of a science major. On the other hand, Ms. Hayakawa exuded the aura of a humanities major. She was a woman in her late twenties, slim with medium-length straight hair in a half ponytail. She wore glasses with translucent frames. Neither of those teachers seemed like they would've been interested in sports.

"I heard that Mr. Suzuki is rooting for Ichijo because he used to be his homeroom teacher."

"And just between us, apparently Mr. Suzuki and Ms. Hayakawa are in a relationship. That's probably why they're both cheering for him."

"Wow, they are?" I put my hand over my mouth, shocked by the unexpected romance between our teachers.

"So like, that banner hanging in front of the school was paid for by the teachers."

"R-Really?" I asked.

"Yep, seems like everyone loved Ichijo."

"I see." I nodded. *It makes sense that the school would want to cheer for an alumnus on the local team, especially when he's going to be more active this season.* I looked at the pamphlet in my hands. *Even though I still can't shake the feeling of being an outsider—a fake Kyoto resident—I'm going to cheer for Sanga with everyone else,* I thought sincerely.

Perhaps our enthusiasm reached Ichijo, because he continued to perform spectacularly. Kyoto Sanga FC won game after game.

A month later came spring vacation, when I went to Kinoshita with my friends and attended the WJSHC's 221st Assembly. It was quite a fulfilling break.

The day after the WJSHC party, I was working at Kura, performing my usual tasks like dusting the merchandise and wiping the shelves. Holmes was sitting at the counter with the accounting book open in front of him.

The grandfather clock gonged four times, indicating that it was 4 p.m. The sound prompted Holmes to look up and turn to pick up the tabletop calendar. He seemed to be looking at the round stamp on this Saturday that said "Aoi — Day Off."

"Aoi," he said, turning to face me. "You wanted this Saturday off, right? Do you have plans with your friends?"

"No," I replied, wiping down a shelf. "I'm going out, but it's not to hang out with friends."

Holmes froze. "Are you going somewhere with a guy, then?" He placed the calendar back on the counter and smiled gently. *It feels like he's saying, "You're at the age where you go on dates, right?"*

"No, that's not it," I said, feeling bitter. "Sadly, even though I'm turning eighteen soon, I don't have anyone to go on a date with." Embarrassed, I slumped my shoulders. *My birthday is next month, on May 3rd. Apparently my grandfather suggested the name "Aoi" for me because I was going to be born in May, when the Aoi Festival is held.*

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Holmes replied. "I don't have anyone to go on dates with either." He smiled softly, and I could've sworn I saw flowers blooming.

He has to be lying. Back when I visited his university, I even saw a girl ask him on a date... But if he says he doesn't have anyone to go on dates with, then that means he isn't going out with the girl he's interested in yet. I felt pathetic for feeling relieved over that realization.

"Is it family-related, then?" Holmes asked.

"No, it's not personal. It's part of a school event."

"A school event...during spring break?"

"Yes. Most of the third-years-to-be are going to Nishikyogoku."

"Why?" Holmes blinked.

Before I could respond, the door opened, making the chime ring.

"Hello," said a young man who looked to be in his mid-twenties. He had a stylish hairstyle and a cheerful smile. He wore a crisp suit and shoes that were polished to a shine. At first glance, he seemed like a salesman. *Did he come here to sell something?* His excessive vibrancy made me feel wary.

"Welcome," I said.

"Oh, Tamiya," Holmes said, closing the accounting book. "So you did decide to come." He smiled as if he was expecting the man's visit.

“Hey there, Holmes. Of course I came—I wanted to ask you something.” The man walked up to the counter, still smiling.

“Please have a seat,” Holmes said.

“Thanks. How was the party? I wish I could’ve gone too,” the man lamented as he sat down.

They know each other? I tilted my head.

“Aoi, this is Tsuyoshi Tamiya,” Holmes said, sensing my confusion. “He was my senior in high school. In fact, he’s the one who brought me to the WJSHC.”

“Oh.” I nodded. *He did say it was his high school senior who invited him to the club.* “Nice to meet you. I’m Aoi Mashiro, a part-timer.” I bowed.

“Nice to meet you too. I’m Tamiya, the guy who dragged Holmes to the WJSHC.” He grinned and saluted.

“I see you haven’t changed,” Holmes said, chuckling. “I’ll make coffee, so please wait here.” Seeming rather happy, he went into the kitchenette.

“You two were on the same committee, right?” I asked, recalling what Holmes said at the party.

Tamiya cocked his head. “Uh, I’m not sure if that’s the right word for it. We were both on the student council.”

“It was the student council?!”

“Yeah, both of us were on the student council for all three years of high school. I was the vice president and he was the treasurer.”

“Three years...” I murmured, impressed. “Come to think of it, you don’t have a Kyoto accent, huh?” A surprising number of my classmates spoke in standard Japanese, perhaps deliberately, but their intonation was still different from how Kanto people spoke. Tamiya, however, spoke with the Kanto intonation.

“Yeah, I’m originally from Kanto. I moved here from Kanagawa in middle school.”

“Oh! I’m from Kanto too. I used to live in Saitama.”

“Thought so. You have the Kanto intonation.”

As we were chatting, Holmes came back from the kitchenette, holding a tray. The moment I saw him, I said, “Holmes, I didn’t know you were on the student council in high school! That’s amazing.”

He shrugged, seeming embarrassed. “I wouldn’t call it amazing. At our school, joining a committee was mandatory. Student council members got preferential treatment across the board, and we were actually given more flexibility than the other committees were. Plus, it made our student records look better. It was advantageous all around.”

“Yeah,” Tamiya agreed. “Everyone avoided joining the student council, but we actually had an easier time than everyone else.”

“That said, there were still things we had to do throughout the year,” Holmes continued. “Since I had a lot of family obligations, Tamiya often did my work for me. I’m indebted to him.”

“Nah, you were the one helping me,” Tamiya insisted. “You always sensed what to do before I said anything, which made the work easier.”

I smiled as I watched their cheerful conversation. *Judging from Holmes’s face, he really did appreciate Tamiya’s help.*

They moved on to talking enthusiastically about the WJSHC party while drinking their coffee. Figuring they had a lot to catch up on, I left to clean the front display window and tidy up the back room. When I was done, I came back to the counter.

“So I hope you can come watch this Saturday,” Tamiya said eagerly.

“This Saturday... Aoi has a high school event and my father and grandfather are both busy, so I’m the only one who can watch the store that day. It’ll have to be another time,” Holmes said apologetically.

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Tamiya slumped his shoulders. He then pulled himself together and looked at me. “Aoi, you’re in high school, huh? I thought for sure you were a Kanto girl who came to Kyoto for university. Which high school do you go to?”

“Oki High,” I answered.

Tamiya blinked. “Wait, you go to Oki High? Are you a new third-year?”

“Yes.”

“So are you coming to Nishikyogoku this Saturday?”

“Um, yes.” I nodded. *How did he know? And why did he say “coming” instead of “going”?*

“Now that’s a coincidence. I’ll be counting on you.” He grinned. *What?* I was utterly confused.

Holmes nodded as if he’d figured everything out. “Aoi, Tamiya does publicity work for Kyoto Sanga FC, the soccer team.”

“Huh? He does?”

“Yes,” Holmes answered before continuing. “And when you said you were going to Nishikyogoku on Saturday, you meant that you were going to Nishikyogoku Stadium to watch Ichijo, an alumnus of Oki High, right?” He nodded in understanding.

“That’s not it,” Tamiya said, shaking his head. “They’re not just watching the game. Saturday’s match is a ‘Spring Break Special’—Sanga’s doing a collaboration with Oki High, Ichijo’s alma mater.”

“A collaboration?” Holmes asked, surprised.

“Yep, Oki High’s new third-years are going to help us out. The girls are going to be cheerleaders and dance before the match, and the

guys are going to be ball boys and lead the cheer group. Sounds fun, right?" Tamiya's eyes sparkled.

"I-It's not really dancing," I said. "We're just going to wear the Sanga cheerleader uniforms and wave pom-poms around." *We still had to practice during lunch break and after school, though.*

The top half of the Sanga cheerleader uniform was white, with "SANGA" in gold letters. The bottom half, from the waist down, was purple with a pleated miniskirt. It was a cute, flashy design, but the skirt was so short that dancing in it felt pretty embarrassing. *Well, at least we're wearing shorts under it.*

Holmes fell silent for a few seconds. He then folded his hands in front of his mouth and said with a serious face, "I'll go."

Tamiya looked at him in surprise. "Don't you have to watch the store?"

"No, I just remembered that I have someone named Rikyu who's like a younger brother to me. I'll ask him to watch the store. I'm definitely going," he declared.

Definitely...? Shouldn't he check with Rikyu first? I couldn't help but worry.

"O-Oh, well that's good," Tamiya said. "I did a lot of the planning for this event, so I wanted you to come and give me your opinion. I'm sure it'll make things more exciting, though. Now all that's left is Ichijo..." He leaned back in his chair and heaved a sigh.

Even I knew what he was getting at. Ichijo was off to a good start this season, but even a layman could tell that his play had gotten noticeably worse lately.

"Ah," Holmes said. "Ichijo doesn't seem to be in good form."

"Seems like there's something on his mind," Tamiya said.

"Well... He's only twenty, after all. A bit of mental uncertainty will affect his play."

"I thought so too. I wonder what we should do."

"I don't know. How about feeding him meat?" Holmes said without much thought.

Tamiya and I choked at the same time.

"F-Feed him meat?" Tamiya repeated. "That's pretty lazy advice."

"Sorry, I'm not interested in young men's troubles at all."

"I mean, I'm not interested in those either, but..." Tamiya sighed again and rested his chin in his hands. His eyes showed a hint of anxiety.

Holmes smiled gently and said, "I don't think it's uncommon for young athletes to go through performance swings. Is there something in particular that's bothering you?"

Tamiya blinked in surprise. "There's no getting past you," he said with a grin. "Take a look at this for me." He took his phone out of his

suit's inner pocket, opened a webpage, and passed it to Holmes.

I stealthily craned my neck to peek at the screen. It was Ichijo's blog.

"This is the most recent post," Tamiya continued. "He hasn't updated it since."

Holmes nodded and looked at the blog post, which consisted solely of a photo of Ichijo's right hand in front of a waterfall. He held it out with his palm facing the waterfall and his fingers spread wide. His tanned skin, rugged wristwatch, and large and bony hand made for a striking image. The time displayed on the watch was 7:17.

Personally, I was more impressed by the waterfall than his hand. It was a very wide, four-tiered waterfall, and I could feel the speed of the water from the picture.

"That's an incredible waterfall," I whispered.

Tamiya nodded and said, "Yeah, it's pretty intense. That's the Fukuroda Falls in Ibaraki Prefecture."

"Fukuroda Falls..." I crossed my arms, unsure if I'd heard of them before.

"This brings back memories," Holmes murmured with a chuckle. "It's one of Japan's Three Great Waterfalls. I've visited it before too. It's in the town of Daigo."

"Three Great Waterfalls?" I asked.

"The other two are Nachi Falls in the Kumano area and Kegon Falls near the city of Nikko," Holmes explained as usual. "Nachi Falls has a delicate beauty and Kegon Falls has vigor. In contrast, Fukuroda Falls has a powerful impact—it feels like it's going to swallow you up."

Tamiya smiled cheerfully and said, "You really haven't changed, Holmes."

"This is a bit strange, though," Holmes mumbled, looking at the phone.

Tamiya nodded firmly. "Yeah, it is. It feels completely different from all his previous posts."

Ichijo's previous blog posts were mostly happy things, like food pictures captioned "This is really good!"

"Ichijo's the childish type who blogs about every little thing, but he didn't post anything at all after this," Tamiya continued. "Then his play worsened... I don't know what's bothering him, but I hope he recovers soon. He's always been a good, stable player, and his cheerfulness kept the team in high spirits." He sighed again.

"I see..." Holmes said. "He's still a professional, though. Even if something painful happened in his private life, he should pick himself back up soon." He gave a strained smile.

"You're right." Tamiya's stiff expression softened. "I can relax

after hearing that from you. Anyway, I'm looking forward to Saturday. I'll be counting on both of you!" he said, regaining his composure and smiling cheerfully.

3

After Tamiya left, I placed the coffee cups on the tray and looked up at Holmes. "What did you think was strange about that blog post, Holmes? Was it that it felt different from his previous ones, like Tamiya said?"

"No." Holmes shook his head lightly. "Well, the different mood certainly was concerning, but it was the picture that was strange. First of all, the fact that he was wearing a watch on his right wrist. Also, I suspect that the watch was set to a fake time."

"Huh?" I blinked. "Why do you think so?"

"The time said 7:17, right?"

"Y-Yes."

"When you go to Fukuroda Falls, you have to pass through a tunnel and pay a small viewing fee. The operating hours vary depending on the season, but the earliest it opens is at 8 a.m. In other words, you can't go in at 7 a.m. There was plenty of sunlight in that picture, so it couldn't have been taken at 7 p.m. Therefore, the watch was either broken or set to the wrong time."

"I-I see... You sure know a lot, Holmes. I'm surprised you even remember the operating hours."

"That's because when I went to Fukuroda Falls, I wanted to go early in the morning, but when I looked up the times, I found out that you can't enter until 8 a.m."

"Oh," I said, taking the tray to the kitchenette. "Do you visit all of the waterfalls too, in addition to cafes, temples, and shrines?"

"I wouldn't say *all* of them, but I did want to at least see the Three Great Waterfalls. Nachi, Kego, and Fukuroda were all magnificent."

"I've seen Nachi Falls and Kego Falls too, and I was moved by their beauty. Fukuroda Falls has a completely different atmosphere though, huh? I could feel its intensity through the picture." I visited Nachi Falls on a family trip with my grandparents, and I saw Kego Falls during a school trip to Nikko. They were as beautiful as I'd expect a famous waterfall to be, but from what I could tell from the picture of Fukuroda Falls, it had a lot of power. I'd probably be overwhelmed if I saw it in person.

"That picture was probably meant to imitate Fukuroda's intensity," Holmes said quietly as he wiped the counter.

"Huh?" I tilted my head as I washed the cups.

"By the way, Aoi, are you taking a bus on Saturday with your

schoolmates?" he asked, regaining his composure.

"No, we're meeting at the stadium." I dried my hands with the towel and went back to the counter.

"What time?"

"The match starts at 3 p.m., and we're meeting an hour before that."

"I see. Would you like to go together, then?" Holmes asked with a smile.

I clapped my hands together and said, "Oh, I'd love to." I heard it was easy to get to Nishikyogoku Stadium, but I was still nervous because I'd never gone there before. Going with Holmes would be reassuring. "Have you been to Nishikyogoku Stadium before, Holmes?"

"Yes, quite a few times. I watch Sanga's games too."

"Huh," I murmured. I wasn't expecting that. "Are you a soccer fan?"

"It's not so much about soccer, but that I support our local teams. I also watch our teams in other sports like basketball."

That makes sense. His love for Kyoto extends to Sanga too.

"Sanga in particular keeps me on the edge of my seat," he continued.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Sanga has been demoted four times—the most out of any team in the league."

"F-Four times?"

"But having demotions means having promotions too. They were promoted to J1 four times, in 1995, 2001, 2005, and 2007. Amazing, right?" he asked, puffed up with pride.

But that still means they got demoted four times, right?

"Their promotion match in 1995 was the most exciting. I didn't actually watch it, but apparently the Sanga supporters, who are normally relatively well behaved, were so happy that they swarmed the athletes after the game. I thought it was great that the people of Kyoto could have such a passionate side to them. Also, as a supporter, I love that Sanga keeps us in suspense."

"O-Oh, I see."

"But in the end, I still want to see them do well. They have such avid supporters, after all. I think this is going to be their season."

I nodded in agreement.

"Also, Sanga holds interesting campaigns that suit Kyoto well."

"Like what?"

"In the summer, they have a campaign where you wear yukata to watch their match. It makes for a nice summer memory."

"Wow, that sounds nice."

“They also did a collaboration with the Kemari Preservation Association where they held a kemari class.” Kemari is a game that was popular in the Heian period. The name means “kick ball” and it involves keeping a ball in the air without using your arms or hands.

“K-Kemari?!” Soccer does *involve “kicking a ball,” but...*

“Yes. According to Tamiya, it was very well received.”

“I don’t know what to say... Even Kyoto’s soccer teams are refined, huh?”

“Yes, and believe it or not, Kyoto has the highest bread consumption in Japan. It’s even called the ‘bread-loving city.’”

“I’ve heard about that. They have the highest consumption in Japan for both bread and coffee, right?”

“Correct. And since we’re the bread-loving city, Sanga held a ‘bread festival’ that was also quite successful. Oh right, and when the team’s name was revised to ‘Kyoto Sanga FC’ in 2007, they held a fashion show at Nishiki Market to show off their new uniforms. I went to see it too.”

“They had a fashion show there?!” *Nishiki Market is nicknamed “Kyoto’s kitchen.” I remember going there on New Year’s Eve and being blown away by the crowds like it was yesterday.*

“Quite innovative, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“The Sanga Cheer Kids is a group of kids ranging from kindergarten to high school that dances at Sanga’s games. It’s very charming.”

“I can believe that. For our dance, we were taught by the Sanga Cheer Kids’ coach.”

“Are all of the new third-years going to dance?”

I shook my head. “If you really don’t want to, or if you can’t because of health reasons, then you can help the cheer squad instead. Most of the girls were excited about it, though. They all thought the uniform was cute.”

“It certainly is.” Holmes nodded. I felt my embarrassment coming back.

“I used to be in the tennis club, so I thought I’d be fine with that kind of uniform, but actually wearing it is still embarrassing.”

“Well... Everyone is wearing the same one, so you won’t have to worry about standing out by yourself.”

“That’s true. No one’s going to be focusing on me.” Feeling slightly relieved, I looked up to see Holmes smiling stiffly.

“Er, well... That’s certainly not the case. That is, I’m looking forward to seeing you,” he said in a forced tone.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s okay, you don’t have to be considerate,” I said, waving my hands.

After a pause, Holmes said, “You really never change.”

“Huh?” I blinked.

A tired smile spread slowly over his face.

4

And then it was Saturday. The plan was to go to Nishikyogoku Stadium with Holmes—but we figured we might as well have lunch together too, so we left a little early to go to a cafe first.

Grinning, Holmes sat down and said, “When you’re in Nishikyogoku, it has to be Ogawa Coffee, right?”

It was a large cafe with very stylish decor. The cafe’s name, “OC Ogawa Coffee,” was displayed on one of the brown brick walls. I’d seen that name here and there around the city. Even supermarkets sold Ogawa Coffee brand coffee beans.

“I see this name a lot, but it’s my first time coming to one.” I took in the wafting scent of coffee. It was a lovely cafe, brightly lit by the outside sun.

“Their coffee and lunch are delicious.”

“I can’t wait to try them, then.”

We both ordered the “Obanzai Lunch Platter.” Obanzai is Kyoto-style home cuisine that uses fresh, locally sourced ingredients. When it arrived, I saw that it consisted of chicken, multigrain rice, assorted vegetables, potato salad, and even quiche. It felt very organic, and it had a large helping of vegetables too. It really did look delicious.

I gave thanks for the food, took a bite, and beamed—it was just as good as I expected. “This is really good.”

“Indeed.”

After we finished eating, we stayed a little longer to wind down with a cup of coffee.

“That really was delicious,” I said. “It was a pretty big portion too.” I smiled, feeling full.

“You’ll need the energy since you’ll be exerting yourself a lot today.”

“But won’t eating this much slow me down?”

“There’s still time, so it’ll be fine. You’ve practiced a lot for this, right?”

“Yes.” We’d been practicing since early March, when the collaboration was greenlit. Mornings and lunch breaks were dedicated to rehearsal, and people even came to school during spring break to practice when possible. Since those practices were in the morning, I attended for as long as I could before going to work. “We split into three teams—those who are really good at dancing, those who can move reasonably okay, and those who aren’t athletic at all. The

choreography and formation were adjusted to suit us, so even though it's still a novice-level dance, it's pretty well put together."

"I see. Do you fall under 'those who are really good at dancing'?"

"N-No, I'm with 'those who can move reasonably okay.'" I slumped my shoulders, embarrassed.

Holmes smiled in amusement.

"Hey, that face means 'I thought so,' right?"

"Sorry, I did think so."

I couldn't help but giggle at his honesty.

After relaxing for a while at Ogawa Coffee, we left to go to Nishikyogoku Stadium. It was 1:30 p.m., so it was still a bit early.

Nishikyogoku Stadium's official name is "Kyoto Nishikyogoku General Sports Park — Stadium for Ball Sports and Track and Field." It's a mouthful, but to put it simply, it's a soccer stadium inside a large athletic park. As the name implies, it's also used for other sports like baseball and track and field. Apparently marathons and high school long-distance relay races often start there too.

The park itself was very expansive, with lush green grass and beautiful cherry blossoms. Since it was such a nice place for a walk, we also saw joggers and hand-holding couples as we made our way through.

"If I lived nearby, I'd want to come here for a stroll every weekend," I murmured, impressed.

"Indeed," Holmes agreed, looking around the park. "I see some people that look like high schoolers. Are they from Oki High?"

I looked and saw some other students from my school. "Oh, yes. They're from Oki High, but they aren't from my year."

"The other years have come to watch too, then?"

"Yes. I can also see people who look like parents or guardians."

"Even though the collaboration is only with the new third-years, other students, alumni, parents, and friends are coming too. When you think about it that way, it's quite an impressive event."

"Yeah, it really is."

We kept walking and came across food carts selling takoyaki, yakisoba, and hot dogs. It reminded me of a festival. There was also Sanga merch for sale, as well as capsule toy vending machines dedicated to Kyoto sports teams. I couldn't help but reach for them.

"Wow, I didn't know there was Sanga yatsuhashi!" Yatsuhashi is one of Kyoto's most famous products: a confection made from glutinous rice flour, sugar, and cinnamon.

"Yes, I recommend it as a souvenir."

"Yeah, I'm sure my brother would love it!" I nodded.

Holmes promptly bought the Sanga yatsuhashi as well as two

purple Sanga neck towels. He handed me the yatsushashi and a towel, saying, "Here you go."

"Th-Thank you. Mutsuki will definitely be happy. You even bought a towel..."

"The towel is for today's game. We wave them to show support for the team." He held up his own neck towel and smiled. I could tell that he was really looking forward to today's match.

We continued on, and I spotted two of my school's teachers walking in the shade. "Oh!" I gasped. It was Mr. Suzuki, the math teacher, and Ms. Hayakawa, the classic literature teacher. I tugged on Holmes's shirt and said, "Holmes, those two people are teachers at my school," looking towards them.

"Ah, they certainly look like high school teachers. They're also wearing polo shirts, perhaps to suit the occasion."

"There's a rumor that those two are in a relationship," I whispered.

Holmes tilted his head. "I wonder about that."

"They don't look that way to you?"

"No, based on their atmosphere and the distance between them, it doesn't seem like they're dating."

I looked back at the teachers, who were walking side by side. Mr. Suzuki was talking enthusiastically, but Ms. Hayakawa seemed to just be nodding along.

"Also, if two teachers at the same high school really were dating, they wouldn't walk together like that. They can only do that because they don't have anything to feel guilty about."

"Oh. In that case, I'm going to go say hi." I bowed to Holmes and ran up to the teachers. Since I was coming from behind, they didn't seem to notice that I was approaching.

"You need to hurry up and give your answer," Mr. Suzuki suddenly said. He sounded extremely frustrated, and I stopped in my tracks.

"I know..." Ms. Hayakawa murmured before falling silent.

What's going on? Maybe Mr. Suzuki asked her out and she's been putting off giving him a response? Faced with this strange situation, I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I turned back, dejected.

Upon my return, Holmes tilted his head in confusion and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Um, well..." I was about to tell him what I'd heard, when suddenly—

"Mashirooo!" came a voice from afar.

Surprised to hear my name, I turned around to see some of the girls from my class. They ran up to us, smiling.

"You came early, huh?" one of them said.

“You guys did too,” I replied.

They all glanced at Holmes.

“Um, is this your boyfriend?” one of the girls asked.

“Whoa, he’s so hot!” another exclaimed. They all started squealing.

I looked back and forth between Holmes and the girls, panicking.

“N-No, he’s just a coworker at my part-time job.”

“Nice to meet you,” Holmes said, placing his hand on his chest and smiling. “I’m Kiyotaka Yagashira.”

They all squealed again.

“Aww, don’t be shy, Mashiroy!”

“Would a coworker come all this way to watch?”

“You’re standing as close to each other as a couple would! I’m so jealous.”

They smacked me on my shoulders and back. Not knowing what to say, I simply shrank back.

“It’s a bit early, but let’s have a meeting with everyone who’s here so far,” the dance leader said.

“Okay.” I nodded and looked up at Holmes. “I’ll be going now, Holmes.”

“All right, do your best out there.”

“A-Also, sorry we keep getting mistaken for a couple.”

“No need to apologize. It’s an honor.”

“A-An honor?” My heart skipped a beat. *He really is good at saying these things.* “A-Anyway, see you.” I bowed awkwardly and ran to meet up with everyone else.

5

By 2 p.m., the supporter seating area of the enormous Nishikyogoku Stadium was already flooded with purple. Oki High was occupying most of the section of unreserved seats in the main stand with the best view of the field. After the cheerleading team finished our dance, we’d be going there to watch the game.

“I’ll be sitting in the same section, so I’ll save a seat for you, Aoi,” Holmes had told me earlier. *That means I’m going to be sitting next to him...which is only going to cause more misunderstandings with my schoolmates.* I smiled wryly as I changed into the Sanga cheerleader uniform, which was white at the top with “SANGA” in gold letters. The waist and skirt were purple. The pom-poms were a flashy magenta.

“Ahh, I’m getting nervous,” Kaori said, holding her fist to her chest. She’d been getting changed nearby.

“Yeah, same.” *This kind of reminds me of middle school, when I*

competed in a major tennis tournament. I clenched my fists and sighed.

The teachers and male students were waiting outside as we left the changing room.

“Good luck, everyone!”

“The stadium’s already packed!”

That just makes me even more nervous.

Mr. Suzuki and Ms. Hayakawa were among them. I was a bit relieved to see that they were smiling cheerfully.

I peeked into the stadium from the passage. Sanga’s mascots, Pursa and Kotono, seemed to be hyping up the crowd. The bright red bird mascots were apparently based on phoenixes. Pursa was making silly movements and Kotono was gently reprimanding him. Watching them was soothing, not just for the spectators, but for our tense nerves too.

“In your positions, everyone,” the leader instructed, bringing us back down to earth.

The new third-year girls of Oki High lined up in six rows.

“Hello, everyone,” came an announcement over the PA system. It was the president of our school’s broadcasting club. “We’re the students of Oki Prefectural High School, Makoto Ichijo’s alma mater. Today, we’ve come to show our support for Ichijo and the Kyoto Sanga FC. Our new third-years will be Sanga’s cheerleaders just for today. I hope you’ll enjoy their performance.”

“Whooo!” roared the audience.

At the same time, a synthesizer began playing a soccer staple—the official anthem of the 2002 FIFA World Cup, composed by Vangelis. It was an uplifting song that everyone knew. The loud music felt like it was reverberating through my body. As the volume increased, I heard the sharp sound of a whistle. That was our cue to rush into the stadium.

The crowd’s cheers got even louder. We immediately split into our three teams: the team forming the circle, the team forming the horizontal line, and the team that was using batons. Once we were in position, we started waving our pom-poms and dancing.

Since we were amateurs rushing to put something together, we knew that we wouldn’t be able to do a good job at difficult movements no matter how hard we tried. Instead, we decided to use simple, comfortable movements and prioritize unity and sharpness.

The rhythm continued to reverberate through my body as we danced in formation. The stadium’s excited cheers reassured me that we were moving in unison. We all danced our hardest, sweat flying everywhere, and when the music ended, we all bowed deeply together. At the same time, fireworks were set off with a *bang!*

The stadium was engulfed in cheers and applause. The other girls

and I bowed again, fighting to hold back our tears of accomplishment. We then retreated to the back area, where the teachers and male students were waiting. They all clapped and praised us.

“You did great, everyone!”

“That was awesome!”

As we wiped off our copious sweat, we exchanged looks, feeling proud yet embarrassed, unable to hide our grins.

“Th-That was so moving,” Ms. Hayakawa said, bawling.

Mr. Suzuki gave her a handkerchief, with a face that said “Good grief.”

Even if they aren't dating yet, they might have feelings for each other.

“Thanks, everyone!” came an energetic voice from behind us. We all whirled around to see the Sanga team members—including Ichijo.

“Ahhhhhh!” everyone squealed, their hands in front of their mouths.

“Oh my god, it's Sanga!”

“They're all so cool!”

I could agree with that. It hadn't clicked with me when I saw their pictures in the pamphlet, but they all looked really cool up close, with their tanned skin, toned physiques, and most of all, their air of confidence.

While everyone was fawning over the athletes, I noticed Ms. Hayakawa immediately retreat and look down, as if by reflex.

Ichijo slowly made his way through the crowd of his juniors. When he reached Mr. Suzuki, he bowed and said, “Thanks for today, Mr. Suzuki.”

“Same here,” Mr. Suzuki replied, smiling. “The students got to have a great experience thanks to you.”

“You too, Ms. Hayakawa.” Ichijo looked at her.

Ms. Hayakawa looked up, seemingly reluctantly, and smiled. “We're cheering for you, so do your best out there,” she said weakly.

“I will.” Ichijo nodded and looked straight at her. “Ms. Hayakawa, my birthday is next month.”

Ms. Hayakawa's eyes widened at his sudden declaration. *Right, his birthday's the same as mine—May 3rd. Is he asking her for a birthday present?*

“But before that, it's almost your birthday, right?” he continued.

Ms. Hayakawa nodded hesitantly.

“I'll give you this. The time is stuck, but it'll move again if you wind it up.” He handed her a wristwatch—the same one that was on his blog post. As he said, the time was frozen at 0:50.

Ms. Hayakawa gasped as she took the watch. She stood stock-still, and it seemed like she was having difficulty breathing.

Could it be...? I gulped as I watched them.

We rushed to shower and get changed, but when we got to our seats, the match had already begun. It seemed like our opening act had livened things up, because the stadium was now entirely covered in purple. The home advantage was so strong that I felt bad for the other team.

"Aoi," Holmes called out, smiling and raising his hand. He was sitting at the end of the back row.

"Holmes," I responded, quickly walking over and sitting down next to him.

"Oki High's Sanga cheerleaders put on a splendid show," he said without a moment's delay.

I blushed and said, "Th-Thank you. We're amateurs, but we all tried our best."

"It had a fresh, youthful vibrance to it, and your earnestness had the energy to sway the viewers' hearts. Many people were moved to tears. I was moved too."

"Y-You're exaggerating."

"The energy was real—Sanga's in perfect shape today." He gestured towards the field. Like he said, I could sense a strong drive in the athletes, perhaps fueled by the packed stadium and the high school students' enthusiasm. They went on the offensive, compelling us to cheer louder. Ichijo's play was particularly astonishing, but he wasn't scoring any goals.

Holmes folded his arms and said dejectedly, "But Ichijo still isn't in his usual condition. It doesn't seem like he's focusing on the game."

The woman sitting in the seat in front of him flinched.

"O-Oh right, Holmes, something happened earlier..." I told him what had happened in the back. How Ichijo told Ms. Hayakawa that his birthday was coming up, how he gave her a stopped watch, saying that her birthday was first, and how the time on the watch was 0:50.

"I see," Holmes said. "We know who Ichijo's message was for, then."

"Y-Yes, I thought so too."

Holmes leaned forward and placed his hand on the shoulder of the woman sitting in front of him. "Right, Ms. Hayakawa?"

The woman flinched again and turned around, seeming frightened. She was probably listening in on our conversation the whole time, though, because she had a resigned expression on her face. After a pause, she said, "Mashiro, may I sit next to you?"

"Y-Yes, of course."

She bowed in thanks and moved to the seat beside mine.

"Did you realize what the message on that watch was?" Holmes asked.

“Yes...” Ms. Hayakawa answered hesitantly.

“Wh-What was it?” I asked. Based on their interaction, I too had sensed that Ms. Hayakawa was the intended recipient, but I didn’t know what the message was. *What does that time mean?*

“It was referencing *Hyakunin Isshu*,” Holmes said smoothly.

“*Hyakunin Isshu*?” I repeated. It was the name of an anthology of one hundred poems by one hundred poets. I absentmindedly took out my smartphone and opened Ichijo’s blog.

Ms. Hayakawa furrowed her brow and bit her lip.

“A waterfall and the time 7:17,” Holmes continued. “A reference to the 77th poem in *Hyakunin Isshu*, which goes, *As the current is swift, the rapids divided by rock shall meet at last. I trust that so too shall we*. It means ‘Although the river’s path is split by the rocks, the rapids move fast, so the water will rejoin into one stream. Similarly, although I’m separated from my love now, I believe that we’ll surely come back together one day.’ It’s a heartrending love poem.”

Lost for words, I looked at Ms. Hayakawa, who was hanging her head. None of us said anything. The stadium’s cheers sounded extremely far away.

“Ms. Hayakawa... Were you going out with Ichijo?” I asked quietly.

She shook her head. “We never did.”

“Huh?” *Then why?*

Holmes said nothing.

Ms. Hayakawa slowly looked up at the field and grimaced. “Last summer, things fell apart between me and my boyfriend who I was hoping to marry one day. I found out that he was cheating on me. In an attempt to distract myself from the painful heartbreak, I started a social media account under my real name. I wanted to show him that I was perfectly fine without him. Then one day, Ichijo followed me and said, ‘Hey, long time no see.’ At the time, I was just happy that my former student, who was now with Sanga, took the time to contact me.”

She spoke with a faraway look in her eyes.

“Ichijo told me to come see one of his games. I said I didn’t want to go by myself, but he said, ‘Everyone’s your friend in the supporter seats, so it’ll be fine.’ I went reluctantly, thinking, ‘I’m honestly not interested in soccer and I doubt I’ll have fun by myself, but I guess I don’t have a choice if he puts it like that.’ But surprisingly, I had a lot of fun. Just like he said, even if you go by yourself, everyone in the supporter seats is on your side. As the game progressed, we rejoiced and worried together, cheered at the top of our lungs, and at the end, when Sanga won, I hugged the woman next to me even though we didn’t know each other. I realized what was so fun about watching

sports—everyone was in the same group, regardless of experience level.”

I looked around the stadium. *Even though you don't know each other, you can still rejoice together. That must be the real thrill of watching sports.*

“I was completely hooked, and from then on, whenever there was a Sanga match on my day off, I'd go see it by myself. I also started texting with Ichijo more often, and occasionally we'd even talk on the phone. At the end of the season, when Ichijo's efforts brought the team to victory, I was so happy that I went to a bar by myself afterwards to celebrate. I posted a picture on my social media captioned, 'A tearful toast to my student's efforts.' When Ichijo saw it, he called me and said, 'Can I join you? Let's toast together.' I was elated and I thought he was just the cutest thing, so I agreed.”

She smiled nostalgically even though it hadn't happened that long ago.

“After that day, we grew even closer. We'd meet on our days off and celebrate together on days that Sanga won. No matter how many times we met, we never ran out of things to talk about. The matches, his team, my work, our hobbies... I mentioned that I loved *Hyakunin Isshu*, and if you gave me a number, I could recite the corresponding poem. At some point, I realized that I was naturally attracted to him. I wondered if he felt the same way about me, but I never brought it up. I knew that the moment I told him how I felt, it'd be over. No matter how you look at it, I'm nine years older than him, and we were teacher and student. I knew I wasn't a good match for him.”

My chest ached because I knew all too well how she felt. She enjoyed being with him, so she must've been scared that voicing her feelings would ruin their cozy friendship.

“Soon after this year's season began, Ichijo told me, 'To tell the truth, I've liked you ever since I was in school. Will you go out with me?' I was so happy that I said, 'Thank you, I like you too,' and we held hands. But I immediately felt scared. Even if we entered a relationship, it surely wouldn't last long. I was convinced that he was just chasing his high school fantasy.”

Ms. Hayakawa smiled self-deprecatingly. Tears rose to her eyes.

“So I told him, 'I like you, but I can't go out with you. Society wouldn't accept our relationship. It wouldn't be good for either of us, so let's stop seeing each other.' But he stood his ground, saying, 'That doesn't make any sense when we both like each other. If it's because I'm too young, then will you go out with me when I'm older? It doesn't have to be right now. Please be my girlfriend someday.' I was afraid that I'd give in if I stayed with him any longer, so I ignored all of his calls and messages.” She heaved a sigh.

“And then Ichijo left that message on his blog...” Holmes murmured.

The poem he left: *As the current is swift, the rapids divided by rock shall meet at last. I trust that so too shall we.*

“Although the river’s path is split by the rocks, the rapids move fast, so the water will rejoin into one stream. Similarly, although I’m separated from my love now, I believe that we’ll surely come back together one day.”

It was filled with deep emotion.

“Yes...” Ms. Hayakawa said, trembling. She was probably fighting back tears.

“U-Um, does Mr. Suzuki, the math teacher, know about you two?” I asked quietly.

She nodded. “Since Ichijo couldn’t get in contact with me, he asked Mr. Suzuki, his former homeroom teacher, to relay a message for him. ‘Let me see you just once. I want to talk this out.’ Then Mr. Suzuki said, ‘It’s not good to run away without giving him an answer.’ He was right. But I’m weak, and I was so happy that Ichijo said ‘Please be my girlfriend someday’ that I couldn’t turn him down. All I could do was run away...” She hung her head, tears streaming down her face.

“He’s already an adult,” Holmes declared firmly.

Ms. Hayakawa froze.

“You were conflicted because of your age difference and the fact that he used to be your student, right? But now he’s twenty—a full-fledged adult. He’ll be twenty-one soon, too. Don’t you think you’re unfair to assume that he’s still a child? He’s not your student anymore either. You’re both adults. When you said it ‘wouldn’t be good’ for either of you, wasn’t that simply fear under the guise of maturity?” he lectured sternly.

Ms. Hayakawa trembled, her eyes wide.

Suddenly, a whistle blew. Startled, we looked at the field. The opposing team committed a foul, so Ichijo was getting a penalty kick. We happened to have a great view from where we were sitting.

“I understand how you feel,” Holmes continued, “but what matters is what you *want* to do, right?”

Ms. Hayakawa clenched her fists.

The time on the watch today was 0:50—in other words, the 50th poem: *I wouldst not have regretted losing mine own life to see you, yet now I hope to prolong it.*

“I wouldn’t have minded giving up my life to see you, but now that we’ve met, I want to live on forever.” In other words, he wants to see her again and live with her.

“Argh! I know that! If it’s just a matter of what *I* want, then of course I want to be with him forever. When Ichijo told me how he felt,

I was happy enough to cry. I wanted to say yes! I'm frustrated that I *couldn't!*" Ms. Hayakawa exclaimed, before immediately gasping and covering her mouth.

We'd been speaking in hushed voices until then, but her loud outburst caught the attention of the people around us, who whirled around.

"Huh...? Ms. Hayakawa, you're going out with Ichijo? Really?" someone asked.

"That's wild," someone else remarked.

Ms. Hayakawa frantically looked around at everyone who was watching her with starry eyes.

I decided to say something before things got even more out of hand. "U-Umm, Ichijo asked her out, but because of their age difference and social positions, she didn't think she was a good fit for him. She hasn't been able to give him a response."

Mr. Suzuki, who'd been sitting nearby, stood up and said, "It's as she says. Ichijo's poor performance seems to be a result of uncertainty from Ms. Hayakawa leaving him hanging. Based on what she just said, she seems to have come to terms with her feelings. If she could give him her answer now, I'm sure his condition would recover instantly." From his tone, he must've been pretty annoyed watching their relationship thus far.

Ms. Hayakawa looked flustered, while everyone else exclaimed, "Ohhh!"

"All right, get in the front, Ms. Hayakawa!"

"Cheer squad, direct us!"

"Gotcha. Get your pom-poms out!"

We picked up our magenta pom-poms as directed. Everyone urged Ms. Hayakawa to go to the front row, but she didn't move.

"You can either go to the front row or leave the stadium," Holmes said calmly. "The choice is yours."

Ms. Hayakawa didn't make eye contact with any of us, but she went to the front row nonetheless, seeming to have made up her mind.

"Yes!" the students cheered.

Over on the field, Ichijo was focusing for his penalty kick.

On the cheer squad captain's cue, we all shouted, "Ichijo!" The moment he turned to look at us, some of the students raised their pom-poms to form the word "YES." Ichijo froze in place, dumbfounded. Then he broke out into a grin and waved, seeming to have noticed Ms. Hayakawa. He quickly went back to a serious expression, jogged up to the soccer ball, and gave it a sharp kick. The ball flew cleanly into the net.

"Whooo!" The crowd went wild.

“I-Ichijo recovered from his slump right away, huh?” I remarked.

“He seems to be even better than before,” Holmes said with a chuckle.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

I looked back to the front row and saw Ms. Hayakawa breaking down in tears. *She wanted to be with the person she loved, but she didn't think she was suitable for him. After running away for so long, she came here and received the strength to face what she really wanted.*

“Oh, it looks like Sanga's going to score again,” Holmes said, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked at the field. “Oh, you're right!”

The ball went in, and we all stood up and cheered, waving our purple neck towels. We all got together and sang the Sanga supporters' song. Before long, Sanga claimed their victory, and we cheered at the top of our lungs.

7

After the match, the staff directed the Oki High students backstage. We chatted about the day while we waited:

“That was an amazing game, huh?”

“Yeah, it was so exciting!”

“I'm happy for Ichijo and Ms. Hayakawa too.”

Ms. Hayakawa looked down at the floor, presumably dying from embarrassment. Holmes and I were keeping an eye on her from a distance.

“Whoa!” everyone exclaimed happily.

Startled, I craned my neck to see what happened. The Sanga players had come backstage. They'd all changed into black suits and were walking gallantly towards us. I couldn't help but admire how cool they looked.

“Look, Ms. Hayakawa!”

“Ichijo's here!”

Everyone excitedly pushed Ms. Hayakawa forward. She hesitantly stepped in front of the group.

Ichijo beamed and said, “Ms. Hayakawa!” He ran up to her and was about to take her hand, when a strong voice cut through the air, saying, “Wait, Ichijo.”

Sanga's captain stepped forward. The excited students quickly quieted down. A moment of silence passed. The air was tense.

“Captain...” Ichijo turned around, bewildered.

“There's something I want to ask before you take that person's hand,” the captain said, staring at Ichijo. “Were you performing poorly because your relationship with her wasn't going well?”

Ichijo silently bit his lip and looked down.

Ms. Hayakawa tried to answer in his stead, but the captain stopped her, holding up his hand and saying gently, "Sorry, but please stay quiet for now." She immediately closed her mouth and nodded.

The captain gave Ichijo a stern look and said, "You can't answer, right? If you say 'yes,' then it'll be like putting the blame on the person you love. But in reality, it's not anyone else's fault but yours, Ichijo. When you're on the field, it doesn't matter if you get dumped. Regardless of what happens, you have to play to your best ability. That's what it means to be a professional."

"I understand." Ichijo nodded, looking serious.

"Society doesn't see it that way, though," the captain continued. "If you're doing great but your performance takes a nosedive when you get involved with a woman, the world will make her out to be the villain. Just look at what they say about athletes' wives. 'He's been a mess ever since he married her,' or on the opposite end, 'He's been playing better ever since he married her.'"

Ichijo silently nodded, a bitter expression on his face.

"Listen here, Ichijo. The most important thing is to value the match. To you it might just be one game out of many. But to the spectators, it's a *special* game."

I nodded unconsciously. *Matches are an everyday thing for them, but for me, today was the first pro soccer game I ever watched.*

"The other day, a boy who came to see our match told me that his father died in an accident, and his mother was working hard by herself to put food on the table. That day was the boy's birthday, and for his present, he begged his mother to let him watch our game, saying that he wanted to see his favorite team play in person. For him, that was his first time ever attending a soccer game. And after the match, he told me, all starry-eyed, 'Thanks for the awesome match. I don't know when I'll be able to come again, but I'm rooting for you. I wanna be a soccer player one day too.' You see, Ichijo, there are kids like that too. It might be a normal game for you, but it could be life-changing for someone else out there."

His words resonated with me. *It's just a single match, but nevertheless, it could change someone's life.*

"We're the players. We can't let our private lives impact our performance. I don't care if you want to worry, but play your best when you're on the field. Remember this, Ichijo—if you don't want your loved ones to be turned into villains, then don't let your personal life affect your play, no matter what it takes. You're not a pro until you can do that. When you've sworn that by your heart, then you can take her hand," the captain declared.

Ichijo stared earnestly at him and proclaimed, "I swear. From here

on out, no matter what happens in my personal life, I won't bring it to the game. When I'm on the field, I'll focus on the match and play my best. For the sake of the people who came to watch us, and for the sake of my love." He took Ms. Hayakawa's hand in his.

"Whoaaa!" everyone cheered joyfully.

"Congratulations, Ichijo!"

"Good for you, Ms. Hayakawa!"

"The captain's speech made me cry."

Words flew every which way.

"Thanks, everyone," Ichijo said. "I'll take this to heart." He bowed deeply.

Ms. Hayakawa bowed too, tears welling up in her eyes. "L-Let me thank you too. I wouldn't have been able to express my feelings if it wasn't for all of you." She looked at us with sincere eyes.

Everyone who'd been chattering away went quiet.

"Even though I'm always telling you 'Don't run away' and 'There's no point in getting hung up over the future,' I wasn't following my own advice," she continued. "I was criticizing myself for falling in love with a former student who was so many years younger than me. But worrying about the future won't help, right? I'm going to listen to myself and stop running away. I'll be honest with him, and hopefully, I'll be able to help him bring out his best performance." She bowed again.

Everyone applauded.

"I'm really happy for you, Ms. Hayakawa!"

"Ichijo, you'd better not make our teacher cry!"

Laughter broke out among the tears.

Watching them from a distance with Holmes, I felt my eyes start to well up too. "I'm so happy...for Ms. Hayakawa and Ichijo..."

"Indeed," said Holmes. "The captain's speech was wonderful too."

I nodded in agreement and looked at Holmes. "But you were a bit stricter than usual this time," I murmured.

Holmes smiled wryly and shrugged. "Perhaps I was... Her indecisiveness reminded me of myself. I might've wound up lecturing myself rather than her."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I tilted my head.

"It's nothing." He shook his head. "It really is coming up soon, though," he continued.

I was even more confused. "Um, what is?"

"Well... I'll tell you when the time comes." He smiled and held his index finger up as if to say, "It's a secret for now."

I immediately froze. *I'm so weak against that gesture.*

"Shall we get going now?" he asked. "That was a fun match."

"Yeah, it feels nice how you can come together with strangers to

cheer for the same team.”

We left the backstage area and went outside. The sun was starting to set, making for a beautiful pink-purple gradation in the sky.

Holmes looked up at the purple clouds and smiled warmly. “It’s like the purple cloud path.”

“What’s that?”

“The road to the Buddhist paradise,” he explained. “The beauty of it seems to be representing Sanga’s destiny. The season’s going to be in full swing soon. I have high hopes for them this year. Let’s cheer hard for them, okay?”

“Yeah!” I looked up at the sunset sky, feeling very refreshed.

Chapter 4: Rose Madder Sky

1

As the end of the short spring break drew near, so did the end of Kyoto's cherry blossom season. The crowds were thinner than during its peak, but the Teramachi-Sanjo shopping arcade was still full of tourists. As usual, though, they all passed right by Kura. It was as quiet as ever inside the antique store.

I was currently in the shop with the manager and a woman who was sitting across the counter from him. I glanced at them as I cleaned. The woman was beautiful and looked smart. She wore a bright-colored suit. Her long glossy hair was tied up in a half-ponytail, and she wore stylish glasses. There was a laptop open in front of her, and she was typing out everything the manager said.

"I've always been a fan of yours, Ijuin," she said. "I'm so glad you agreed to do this interview." She looked up at him and smiled. It was her first time doing so since arriving, and her gentle smile instantly relieved the tension that'd been building up.

Faced with that charming smile, the manager grinned back, looking very pleased. "It's an honor to hear that from an editor," he replied.

Apparently she was an editor who had requested an interview at Kura, the place where the author Takeshi Ijuin did most of his writing. The manager gladly accepted.

"That's not true," she insisted. "You readily accepted even though we're such a small web magazine aimed at an overseas audience. I really am grateful." She bowed humbly.

The manager shook his head. "Don't worry about it," he said with his usual gentle expression.

The woman's business card was on the counter. It said, "JCN — Japan Creative News — Editorial Department — Hitomi Hamaguchi."

"I'm fortunate enough to have my works translated and sold in bookstores overseas, but I usually don't get the opportunity to thank my foreign readers," the manager continued. "I'm very happy that you reached out to me."

"That's a relief." The woman smiled.

Huh, so the manager's books are sold overseas too. That's amazing, I thought as I continued to clean. I was curious about the interview, but I couldn't exactly listen in on purpose. Still, there weren't any

customers and the only other noise was the quiet jazz music playing in the background, so I couldn't help but overhear their conversation. I felt bad for eavesdropping, so I went to the opposite end of the store to dust the shelves and wipe the mirrors and porcelain. I returned to the counter when I was done.

"So, um, could you show me what we discussed on the phone?" the editor asked hesitantly.

"Yes, of course," the manager said, slowly standing up. "The storeroom is on the second floor, although I'm ashamed to say it's rather messy."

The woman smiled cheerfully and said, "It's fine. Being able to see celadon—one of the world's greatest treasures—is like a dream come true. Do you mind if I take pictures?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Thank you."

The woman took a Nikon DSLR camera out of her bag and followed the manager up to the second floor.

"Huh," I murmured as I watched them. *So he's showing her the celadon.* China's celadon pottery is considered a supreme treasure. Its modest yet sublime beauty and its abundant grace are said to embody the aesthetic sense of the Chinese people. The piece she was about to see was one of only a few dozen like it confirmed to exist in the world. It's an incredible, priceless work of art that was originally discovered by the owner's teacher, Kuranosuke Yagashira, in mainland China.

The small, smooth, jade-green jar is usually kept at the owner's estate in Higashiyama, but occasionally there are requests to see it, at which times it's brought to the room at the back of Kura's second floor. It's a windowless room that's kept at the optimal temperature for preserving art. There's a security camera inside and several locks on the door, including a padlock and a digital number lock. The security is impenetrable. At times, the room is also used to store expensive antiques that museums and department stores want appraised.

Is she going to include pictures of Kura and the celadon pottery in addition to the manager's picture in the article? That means people overseas will learn about Kura when they read the interview...which is great, but if we start getting a lot of foreign tourists at Kura, it might be hard to deal with them.

Kyoto is a world-famous tourist destination, so there are a lot of foreigners here. I often get asked for directions when I'm out walking. My English grades are okay, but I always get nervous when foreigners talk to me. The vocabulary just vanishes from my head. *Explaining antiques in English is going to be hard. I'll have to study more,* I thought, clenching my fists. I didn't know how many subscribers JCN had, but I

continued to fantasize about foreign tourists coming to Kura anyway.

Before long, I heard footsteps coming from the stairs. I looked up to see the manager and the editor smiling at each other.

"It really was beautiful—and moving," the editor said. "I still can't believe I was able to see celadon up close."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," the manager said.

"Um, if it's all right with you, I'd like to visit that cafe you say you always go to. Do you have time?" the editor asked timidly.

The manager grinned and said, "Yes, I have time for tea."

"Oh, thank you!" She clapped her hands, her eyes shining. In that instant, she looked like a mere fan rather than a magazine editor.

The manager didn't seem to mind having a beautiful young woman gleefully talking to him. He smiled happily before looking at me apologetically and saying, "Aoi, I'll have to excuse myself..."

"Sure, take your time." I smiled and bowed.

"Thanks for bearing with me," the editor said. "Now then, Ijuin..."

"Yes, let's go."

The two of them left the store to go to the cafe on Teramachi Street. *A successful author and a beautiful editor... There's a big age gap, but they might be a good match for each other.* I smiled and picked up the tray, intending to wash and put away the coffee cups they'd been drinking from.

"Huh...?" I blinked. There was only one cup on the counter.



In a dim, windowless room, a man sat on a sofa, surveying his surroundings. The wallpaper was light pink. There was a large TV and a dresser, but the majority of the space was occupied by an enormous bed. It was very much a hotel for lovers' trysts.

The man took off his hat and grinned. "Even the refined city of Kyoto has hotels like this, eh?" he said as if to himself.

The editor who'd just been interviewing Takeshi Ijuin at Kura sat down on the bed and took off her wig. She sighed, relieved to be back to her pixie cut. "Well yeah. You can find hotels like this in rural villages that don't even have convenience stores."

The woman looked at the smiling man on the sofa next to the bed. He was bald like a monk, and there was a sharp glint in his almond-shaped eyes. He went by many names, but to the Yagashira family, he was known as Ensho.

"I met with him," she said with a cigarette in her mouth. "It went as planned." She ruffled her short hair.

"Thanks. So what was Takeshi Yagashira like?" Ensho asked, lighting a cigarette for himself. "We met at the New Year's Eve party, but I don't remember much about him," he murmured.

“Eh, he was normal. Mild-mannered good guy. I didn’t sense any malice from him at all. I always thought writers were all kinda eccentric, but I guess there’s normal guys like him too.”

“Hm.” Ensho rested his chin in his hands and took a puff from his cigarette. *In other words, exactly as he looks. Completely different from his son, eh? Then again, he looks like a “mild-mannered good guy” at first glance too.* He laughed and then stared at the woman. “And the celadon?”

“It was there. Security was way tighter than I expected.”

“Figures.” Ensho chuckled and laid back against the sofa.

“There’re several surveillance cameras around the store and they use one of the popular security companies. Once we’ve hacked in, we can disable the cameras for about an hour. But the room on the second floor is special. It has its own security system.”

“Its own?”

“Mmhm. They make it look like it’s the same security company, but it’s different. The locks on the door, including the padlock, are probably a facade—camouflage to throw you off guard. The real problem is the digital number lock that comes after the fingerprint scanner. Oh right, I got his prints.” The woman put on gloves and took a coffee cup out of her bag.

“Thanks. So about that number?”

“I couldn’t see it, but it was probably twelve digits.”

“Twelve...”

“He also said that they change the password every day.”

“His son does that?”

“Mmhm. He even said, ‘If you get it wrong, the door won’t be openable for a while, and multiple failed attempts will trigger the security system.’”

“It changes every day? What a pain.”

“Mmhm. I get that the celadon’s a priceless treasure, but it’d take a ridiculous amount of effort to sell it considering Seiji Yagashira’s connections. If we’re going to carry out this job, we’ll have to hire a security professional, which won’t be cheap. Do you really need to cross such a dangerous bridge? You’re just a counterfeiter—you’ve never physically stolen anything before, right? So you’re an amateur. There’re easier ways to make money out there, you know?”

“You’re completely right.” Ensho grinned and nodded.

The woman shrugged, exasperated. “Not going to turn back, huh? Oh well, it’s been a while since I’ve had something to be excited for.” She giggled. “Okay, let’s lift the fingerprint then. Get the aluminum powder.” She stood up, but Ensho grabbed her arm, drawing her into a kiss. When their lips parted, she asked, “What about the fingerprint?”

“We can do that later. Can’t make our move until nighttime anyway, so there’s plenty of time.”

“Oh, I haven’t seen that fiery look in your eyes in forever. I’m glad you still get excited right before an evil scheme. Looks like you’re back to how you were before you entered the priesthood.”

“That was all bogus.”

“Oh I know.” The woman wrapped her hands behind Ensho’s neck and kissed him on the lips. They proceeded to tumble onto the bed.



I heard Kura’s chime and looked over to the door, thinking that the manager might’ve returned. However...

“Oh, Holmes.”

“Hello, Aoi.” Holmes entered the store and smiled, his elegant eyes narrowing into arcs.

“Good afternoon, Holmes.”

“Where’s my father?”

“He just left with the editor to go to a cafe.” I looked at the grandfather clock and furrowed my brow. “Now that I look at the time, it’s already been two and a half hours.” *Does he really have that much to talk about with her?* I frowned at the clock.

Holmes nodded in understanding and said, “He most likely stayed in the cafe to work on his manuscript after their discussion.”

“Oh, that does sound like something he’d do.” I nodded and looked up at Holmes. “I thought you were going to be at university all day today, Holmes. Didn’t you say there was an event?”

“Yes, there was. I was planning on going straight home afterwards, but I couldn’t help but worry about the celadon, so I came to retrieve it.”

“Did you think the manager would forget to take it back?”

“The security here is impenetrable, so forgetting wouldn’t be too much of an issue. I’m more concerned about him dropping it and breaking it.”

“Oh...” I smiled wryly. Everyone was nervous because the manager dropped an expensive tea bowl the other day. As a result, the owner and Holmes were both making him keep a safe distance from anything valuable. He did regret his mistake—the other day, I saw him staring forlornly at the glass case with the Shino tea bowl in it, saying, “This tea bowl is one of my father’s most precious treasures, but I’m not allowed to touch it. They told me it was too dangerous.” As I was looking at the Shino tea bowl, the grandfather clock chimed.

“Oh right, Aoi, when does school begin for you?” Holmes asked.

I looked at the calendar. Today was April 8th. “Umm, the new semester starts on the 11th.”

Holmes nodded. "You're finally going to be a third-year, huh?"

"Yes..." I nodded a little, smiling shyly. I'd decided that I was going to enjoy spring break, and after the new school year began, I was going to confess my feelings to Holmes. Realizing that the time was nigh made me nervous...because then I might not be able to keep working at Kura. My chest felt tight, and I closed my eyes in anguish.

"Aoi?" Holmes peered into my face, looking worried.

The door chime rang again, and this time it was the manager who came in.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw Holmes. "Oh, Kiyotaka. I didn't think you were coming today."

"I finished earlier than expected," Holmes explained. "I'm going to bring the celadon back while I'm here."

"Oh, leave that here for tonight. I have to show it tomorrow too."

"You do?" Holmes tilted his head, confused.

"I was told that the editor forgot to take a picture of the foot and got yelled at. They really want that picture, apparently."

"I see. That certainly is necessary."

The "foot"—in other words, the pedestal part at the bottom—is crucial for determining authenticity. So when it comes to valuable antiques, people are very interested in how the foot looks. I could understand why they'd want that photo. *I wouldn't have understood before, though. Kura's really rubbing off on me.*

I absentmindedly glanced at the counter and suddenly realized something. "Oh right," I said, looking at the manager. "Th-The coffee cup you were using is gone."

"I know." He nodded. "She said she wanted to take a picture of my cup with a fancy backdrop since it's 'an author's essential tool.' She'll return it tomorrow."

"Oh, I see." I placed my hand on my chest and sighed, relieved that I hadn't somehow misplaced it.



Dark nights when the moon is behind the clouds might just be the best for evil schemes.

Ensho, dressed inconspicuously in a black hat, jacket, and jeans, stepped out of the empty backstreet into the shopping arcade and quickly walked towards Kura. He went around to the back of the building. Unlike the front door, the back entrance was cold and unwelcoming.

"I'm here," he whispered.

A voice came from his earpiece: "*Got it. He says to hang on until exactly midnight.*"

"All right. Man, hackers sure are something, eh?" Ensho grinned

and crouched in front of the door. "I could really use a smoke right about now," he added, looking up at the store. *Even if you put up the latest and greatest security, there'll be a hacker who can crack it. It's like a game of cat and mouse.*

"Ten seconds until it's unlocked. Finish the job in fifteen minutes and get out of there by twenty."

"I know. Thieves make their escape within fifteen minutes—it's universal knowledge."

"Universal?" The voice laughed.

Ensho smiled and put on his leather gloves.

"Okay, he says it's open and the first-floor cameras are frozen."

"Gotcha." Ensho nervously and slowly turned the doorknob. To his mild relief, the door opened with a *creak*.

He'd been prepared for pitch black, but the store was dimly lit by miniature light bulbs. A grandfather clock ticked in the background. The rows of antiques and the faintly smiling dolls sent a shiver down his spine. *It's like a haunted house*, he thought, smiling wanly as he silently made his way forward. He had the layout of the store memorized—the positions of the shelves, sofas, counter, and stairs.

"He says some of the cameras on the second floor aren't connected to the security system, so he can't stop them."

"Well, it doesn't matter if I show up."

Ensho nimbly made his way upstairs without making a sound. The storeroom was littered with stacks of cardboard boxes, but he ignored them all and went straight to the door in the back. It was covered in locks, including an old-fashioned padlock. *Camouflage, facade, whatever. Maybe someone here just likes locks. Either way, nothing a li'l tool and some know-how can't handle.* He easily unlocked them.

Next was the fingerprint scanner.

"All right," he said, taking off one of his gloves and putting a rubber cap over his thumb. Takeshi Yagashira's fingerprint was imprinted on it.

The screen immediately displayed the following: "Authenticated. Please enter the password."

On the wall next to the door, there was a cover disguised as a power outlet. Opening the cover revealed a three-by-four number pad, with the top row being "1 2 3" and the bottom row being "* 0 #" — the arrangement you mainly see on telephones.

Here's where it really begins. A twelve-digit number.

Ensho took a deep breath. He'd simulated this countless times in his head before coming here.

If I were him, what number would I use? A number that changes every day. Knowing him, there's no way in hell it's random. Even this padlock's here for a reason—he knows that something like this ain't gonna stop a

real thief. It's only here for the aesthetic of having an antique padlock on a door that's guarding treasure.

So how does he come up with the number? It should be something he can associate with the calendar date without actually being that. Now that it's past midnight, the date's April 9th. After a whole lotta thinking in his shoes, the answer I came up with was "the ninth poem that reminds you of spring"—because the ninth poem in Hyakunin Isshu is as "spring" as it gets.

"The flowers' color has faded in vain, and so too have I as I gazed at the falling rain." In other words, "The cherry blossoms faded in vain during the long spring rains. Similarly, my beauty faded while I fretted about love, society, and more." The self-deprecating poem of Komachi Ono, who was once hailed as an unrivaled beauty. This has to be a clue.

"It's the first part," Ensho murmured. What color are the flowers? There're tons of possibilities, but this is him we're talking about, so the name should have "sakura" in it, for cherry blossoms. A color name with "sakura" that reminds you of faded cherry blossoms... There's two: sakura mouse gray and ashen sakura pink. Both of them work, but that guy wouldn't pick "mouse." Since it's a flower color that a former beauty used to describe herself, he'd definitely pick ashen sakura pink. The hex code for that color is #e8d3d1. Converting the letters to numbers based on alphabetical order gives me 584341—but that's only six digits. Even if I add "#," it's only seven. Actually, forget the digits—I can't imagine him converting a color code directly to numbers for a password. In which case...

"Caesar." There're countless ciphers out there, but he seems like he'd like Julius Caesar. I bet he'd use that guy's cipher too. "e8d3d1" in Caesar's cipher is "h11g6g4." Converting that to numbers, I get 8117674...seven digits. But if I also put 0409—today's date—through the cipher, I get 37312. That makes a total of twelve. This should be it—the date probably comes first.

Ensho gulped and entered "373128117674."

The screen displayed: "Incorrect password."

"Seriously?" He pressed his hand to his forehead. It came as a shock to him because he had full confidence in his emulation of Holmes's thought process.

Maybe it's not the poem then. But somehow, I just know it has to be that. More importantly, I don't have time to come up with something new. I have to go with the poem. Maybe there was no point in using the Caesar cipher. I'll just enter it as-is. Wait, no, that can't be it. I'll try sakura mouse gray.

"Tell me the color code for sakura mouse gray," he whispered.

He heard the sound of the woman typing, and then her voice: "It's #e9dfe5."

“Thanks.”

Putting that through the Caesar cipher gives “h12gkh8.” In number form, 81271188.

“Eight digits. Adding the Caesar-fied date makes thirteen.” That’s too many. It has to be twelve. Or maybe the date doesn’t get converted? No, that can’t be right. Maybe the number of digits is different today.

Ensho entered the new number, “3731281271188.”

Again, the screen displayed: “Incorrect password.”

“Shit.”

“It’ll probably lock you out if you get it wrong one more time. Then you won’t make it in time.”

“I know, shut up for a minute.” He clicked his tongue and held his head in his hands, unable to contain his frustration.

It’s probably not sakura mouse gray. Ashen sakura pink is better. But is it really? There’s no time. I gotta think fast.

“Argh!” He clicked his tongue again at the invisible pressure. *I feel like a wartime cryptanalyst. Suddenly his eyes widened. Wartime... Right, the Enigma machine. It’s gotta be more than just that, though. First, put “e8d3d1” through the Caesar cipher to get “h11g6g4.” Change that to numbers—8117674. Back to letters—“haagfgd.”*

“Can you put ‘haagfgd’ through Enigma for me?”

“I’m not going to have an ancient machine like that, you know? Oh, looks like there’s a program that simulates it. One sec.” After a brief wait, she answered, *“It’s ‘rtwqokw.’”*

“Thanks.”

Convert that to numbers and we get...182023151123.

“There... Twelve digits.” Ensho wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Think it’ll work?”

“No idea. If it doesn’t, then oh well.” He carefully entered the twelve-digit number, fingers trembling from nervousness, excitement, or both.

The screen displayed... “Authenticated.” The sound of an extremely heavy lock being opened echoed through the quiet room.

Ensho heaved a great sigh, noticing that his back was dripping with sweat.

“Congrats, you did it.”

“Yup.” I beat him.

Ensho stood up straight and opened the door, revealing a pitch-black windowless space. He took a small flashlight out of his pocket, turned it on, stepped into the room, and froze—he sensed a sharp atmosphere, as if he’d entered a cage with a terrifying beast lurking in the shadows.

“Good evening,” said a calm voice.

Ensho gulped and pointed the flashlight at the center of the room.

There was a table holding a wooden box that presumably contained the celadon. And there was also a smiling Kiyotaka Yagashira holding a wooden sword.

2

...I can't sleep.

I looked at the clock on my wall for what must've been the hundredth time and sighed. Time was passing unproductively as I sat on my bed, hugging my knees. It was now past midnight and I didn't even feel like getting under the blanket. I kept replaying today's events in my mind.

When Holmes found out that the editor had taken the cup with her, he immediately stood up, opened his laptop, and picked up the phone. "I apologize for interrupting you when you're likely busy. I'm Yagashira from Kura, the antique store in Kyoto." He was calling the company that ran the magazine's website. "Ah, is that so? Okay, I understand. Thank you. Have a great day." He hung up the phone and mumbled, "I suspected as much." He then opened the drawer, took out something that looked like a transceiver, and immediately started walking around the store with it.

"Kiyotaka?" the manager asked.

"Wh-What's going on, Holmes?"

Holmes sighed softly and looked at us. "It doesn't look like we've been bugged."

"Bugged?" the manager and I asked in unison.

"This is a listening device detector," Holmes said. "I bought it just for fun—I didn't think I'd actually have to use it one day." He put the object on the counter.

"Why would you need to use that now...?" the manager asked, bewildered.

"Tonight, a despicable fellow is going to come for the celadon," Holmes declared flatly with a determined look in his eye.

The manager and I exchanged glances.

"A-A despicable fellow?"

"I can't be completely sure, but I imagine it's Ensho." Holmes placed his hand on his chin and chuckled. Despite the amused look on his face, his whole body radiated an overwhelming fury. "I think we should give him a nice welcome. Can you help me, Dad?" He turned to me, smiling gently. "Please don't make that face, Aoi," he said. "There's nothing to worry about." Then he went upstairs to the back room to begin preparing his attack.

Even though he said that, I can't help but worry anyway. How does Holmes feel right now, waiting for Ensho in that windowless room? I clenched my trembling hands and pressed my face into the cushion.



Ensho's breath caught in his throat upon seeing who'd been lying in wait. He gulped. They were predator and prey—Kiyotaka was the snake lurking in the cave; he was the unsuspecting frog.

Kiyotaka smiled in amusement as he watched Ensho stand there, paralyzed in fear. "Please don't make that face. Was it so unexpected that I'd be here?" He pressed the switch on the lamp on the table. With a *click*, the room was illuminated by a faint light. He slowly looked up and grinned. "Your plan seemed natural at first glance, but something was off."

"What?" Ensho squeaked, then gulped again, realizing that his voice betrayed his distress.

"The first thing that was unnatural was that my father received an interview request from a web magazine targeted at an overseas audience. Now, since his works are translated and sold in overseas bookstores, I wouldn't call it *strange*, but to be honest, I thought, 'Why him?' Assuming that the magazine wants publicity, there are a lot of historical novelists with a stronger overseas presence. And why would they send someone all the way to Kyoto? However, even that's not out of the question if you consider that the editor could be his fan," Kiyotaka explained as if soliloquizing. He slowly walked around the table.

"So I took a look at the website. The site was real, but they'd never interviewed an author before. If anything, it was more of a scientific magazine that presented Japanese research findings. Still, this could've been a new project they were starting up. But even thinking about it that way, it still felt strange that they'd choose my father as the first subject. Something didn't sit right with me."

Kiyotaka continued to pace around the table.

"Additionally, when I heard that the request included, 'I heard a rumor that the Yagashira family is in possession of a piece of Chinese celadon ware, and I'd love to take photographs of it,' I wondered if the target was not my father, but the celadon. If that were the case, it would make more sense to ask to interview my grandfather. He works overseas as well, so he and the celadon would surely make for an interesting article. Well, it could be that they wanted to combine an author interview with pictures of celadon, but *something* just didn't seem right." He slumped his shoulders.

Ensho stood frozen in place, not saying a word.

"Then the editor took my father's cup, saying that it was for

photography purposes. If she was going to take a picture of his usual cup, wouldn't it be better to have it on the store's counter? She said she wanted a more stylish place with better lighting, but isn't that strange considering that she came all the way to Kura to see his usual writing environment? Why would the cup be shown in a different location by itself? What's more, she took the unwashed cup, saying that she'd feel bad making him wash it—another statement that makes sense yet feels strange. And then she was going to come back the next day because she forgot to take a picture of the jar's foot. Now, I can understand why they'd want a picture of that, but something wasn't right. *Everything* about this situation could be described, 'It makes logical sense, but something isn't right.'"

Kiyotaka stopped walking and looked at Ensho.

"So I called the company that operates the website and they said there was no such project. They have an employee with the same name as the editor who visited my father, but today—or I suppose yesterday now, she was at their Tokyo office all day. She never came to Kyoto. Plus, she's in her forties. A fake editor visited my father, had a fake interview with him, looked at the celadon, took his cup, and arranged it so that the celadon would be kept here tonight. I asked my father some more questions and found out that she asked for the interview to be on either April 9th or 12th—the days when I wouldn't be at the store because of university events. At this point, I knew without a doubt that a despicable fellow was going to come for the celadon. It'd have to be someone who knew our circumstances well—and your face was the first to come to mind." He smiled but there was still a sharp look in his eyes.

Ensho felt tense, as if looking away for a fraction of a second would get him slashed. He maintained eye contact and clenched his fists.

"I was going to wait outside the door to this room," Kiyotaka continued. "But as you know, I'm not very nice. I wanted to see if you could crack my password, so I asked my father to lock the door so that I could wait inside. I also left the password the same as it was before. If you couldn't solve it and backed down, then that would've been satisfying in itself. I'd enjoy watching your discouraged face in the camera footage over and over. But here we are now. I'm impressed—you truly embodied my thought process. Putting your imitation skills to full use, huh?" He chuckled, smiling.

"Why thanks." Ensho sighed softly and returned the smile.

"Now then." Kiyotaka gripped his wooden sword tighter, and in the same instant, swung it down at Ensho's head. A loud *bam* echoed through the room.

Ensho winced as he caught the blade right above his head with

both hands. “Such a violent kid. Based on how much my hands hurt, that blow would’ve killed me if it hit.”

“I’m simply fending off a scoundrel who broke into our store. Regardless of what happens to him, it was deserved, no?”

“You say that, but I bet you knew I’d catch it.”

“I can’t deny that.” Kiyotaka smiled sweetly, sending chills down Ensho’s spine.

“You never change, eh? Feels like something like this happened before.”

“Yes, it was at Nanzen-ji Temple.”

“First time we met, yeah? Now that’s nostalgic.”

“Indeed, Ensho.” Still holding the wooden sword, Kiyotaka raised his leg and kicked Ensho in his solar plexus, sending him flying backwards out of the room.

“Guh!”

“We can’t fight inside the room—it’d be problematic if something happened to the celadon.” Kiyotaka calmly stepped outside.

“You’re really a completely different person when you show your true colors.”

“True colors... Anyway—” Kiyotaka let go of the wooden sword and grabbed Ensho by the collar. “Ensho, what do you think you’re *doing?*!” he roared.

“What? Can’t you tell? Just a little burglary.” Ensho sneered.

Kiyotaka’s right hand trembled as it gripped Ensho’s collar. “I despise you. You annoy me beyond belief. And yet, I tried to understand you. Your prejudice against me and your sentiments towards counterfeiting angered me, but deep down in my heart, I sympathized with you.” He paused, then switched to his Kyoto accent. “But this time, I cannot fathom your actions. What on earth are you doing? How far have you fallen?” He tightened his grip.

“How far have you fallen?”

Something about those words must’ve struck a nerve—Ensho swung his fist at Kiyotaka’s cheek.

“Tch!” Kiyotaka staggered but quickly recovered his stance. He wiped the blood from the broken corner of his lip with the back of his hand.

“How far have I fallen? I’ve always been right here at the bottom. How would a spoiled kid at the top of the pyramid know anything about it?” Ensho shouted in Kiyotaka’s face, so close that their noses were nearly touching. “You were blessed with everything anyone would want, and I only had my alcoholic dad who beat me. I had no choice but to make counterfeits so that he’d be happy with me—so that I could *survive!* You’d never understand!”

Kiyotaka grimaced and pushed Ensho’s face away with the palm

of his hand. "You're right. I don't understand why you'd willingly stay at the bottom forever."

Ensho swung his fist again, but Kiyotaka caught his arm in his armpit and slammed him against the floor with a loud *bang*.

"Indeed, it makes no sense," Kiyotaka continued. "Your childhood wasn't your fault. You were young and powerless, so you had no choice but to do what you did. Children sometimes become slaves to their parents." In his fury, he suddenly reverted to his Kyoto accent. "But now it's different. You're an adult now. You're not anyone's slave anymore. If you work hard, you can climb out of the depths. So why on earth are you content with being at the bottom forever?!" he shouted, climbing onto Ensho's fallen body and grabbing him by the collar again.

Ensho raised his upper body and grabbed Kiyotaka's collar back. "And I'm *saying* that that's how people at the top think. People who were born and raised at the bottom stay there forever. There's no escaping. Thinking it's just a matter of 'working hard' is exactly the kind of lazy, selfish thing a spoiled kid would say. You don't understand."

"You're right. I don't understand why you're like this."

"Now you sound like a broken record," Ensho jeered.

"I seriously don't understand! How many times do you think I've dreamed of having your talent? I'd sell my soul to the devil for it! You're...you're so talented, so why are you doing this?!" Kiyotaka cried out in grief, as if wringing the words from the bottom of his throat.

Ensho was dumbfounded. "What...?" He widened his eyes in shock and looked back at Kiyotaka. The young man's fists were trembling and his eyes were bloodshot. "T-Talent?" Ensho stuttered, taken aback. "That's...another thing that spoiled kids say. You just want what you can't have. How boring." He sneered, shoved Kiyotaka off him with all of his might, and ran away at full speed.

"I'd sell my soul to the devil for it!"

Ensho clicked his tongue, trying to shake the words from his head as he fled downstairs.

Back on the second floor, Kiyotaka didn't make any attempt to chase after Ensho. He brought his palm to his forehead and sighed deeply. Noticing that his cheek had begun to sting, he slumped his shoulders ever so slightly and stood up. *I managed to avoid the brunt of the hit by turning my head towards the blow, but that fist is still a dangerous weapon.*

"Seriously, what a corrupt priest."

Kiyotaka slowly descended the stairs to get something to cool his

cheek with. The moment he reached the first floor, he gasped, immediately realizing that something was wrong.

The Yagashira family's other treasure—the Shino tea bowl—was missing from its glass case.



It's past 4 a.m. now. Night has passed, and morning is just one step away. Did Ensho really show up? If he didn't, and I worried this much for nothing, then that's fine. But if he did, and the two of them faced off... What would've happened? Holmes does martial arts, so he may be strong. But Ensho looks strong too. If a real fight broke out, I don't think Holmes would leave unscathed. I imagined Holmes lying on the floor, covered in blood, and shook my head to rid myself of the thought.

I'd been refraining from texting him since it was such a crucial time, but I couldn't take it anymore. I took out my phone and started typing with shaky fingers: "Holmes, are you okay?"

I hesitated to send the message. *What if the notification sound gets him into trouble?* I asked myself. *Holmes wouldn't be that careless, though. He definitely either turned off his phone or put it on silent mode.* I pressed "Send."

Several minutes passed without a response. *Did he go to sleep because Ensho didn't show up? Or is he unconscious...?* The terrifying thought made my fingertips feel cold.

Then my phone buzzed, making me flinch. The screen said, "You didn't get any sleep, right? I'm sorry for making you worry. I'm okay."

All of the tension left my body. "Ensho didn't show up?" I immediately replied.

"He did. I protected the celadon, but he stole the Shino tea bowl. I wasn't careful enough."

I gasped, got out of bed, and got ready to head over to Kura. I left the house quietly to avoid waking up my family.

The spring sky at 4:30 a.m. had that deep blue color that you see just before the sunrise. There were no people or cars on the streets—the neighborhood was so still that it felt like I had it all to myself. I frantically pedaled my bike, my heart pounding with anxiety. That short last message was enough for me to sense exactly how he was feeling: anger towards Ensho, anger towards himself, and despair.

What can I accomplish by going there? I wondered, but I couldn't just sit and do nothing. I jumped off of my bicycle and pushed it into the Teramachi shopping street, half running towards Kura. The district was always bustling, but now it was dead silent. It felt like I was in another world.

I couldn't see inside the store because the curtains were closed, but I could tell that there was a faint light on. I reached the door,

parked my bicycle, gulped, and grabbed the doorknob. It wasn't locked. I gently opened the door, my heart beating like crazy.

Holmes looked up at me when he heard the chime ring. He'd been sitting in front of the counter, hanging his head.

"Aoi..." He seemed extremely surprised. The dim light from the lamp on the table was enough for me to see that his cheek was swollen and dark red, and the corner of his mouth was torn.

I gasped. "Holmes, you're injured?"

"Ah... It's nothing major. I've dealt with it." He smiled, but there was no energy behind it. "You came all this way? It's dangerous to go outside this late at night."

"It's already morning. Sorry, I just couldn't sit still." I entered the store and caught a glimpse of the empty glass case with the corner of my eye. The Shino tea bowl had always been there. The first time I saw it was the day I first visited this store. It was the first antique that'd ever captivated me. It was the Yagashira family's treasure, and it was special to me too.

I didn't know what to say. Tears welled up in my eyes. *Why would he do this?*

"Aoi..." Holmes narrowed his eyes, placed his hand on his forehead, and looked down.

Silence. *Is he crying?*

I couldn't even speak. It felt like I was suffocating.

After some time, Holmes murmured quietly, "I don't know if I'm unbearably angry or unbearably sad." His voice quivered.

"Holmes..." My hand quivered too as I lightly touched his shoulder. He flinched and apologized. Without looking up, he gently placed his palm over the back of my hand. I could feel his anger and sorrow from the way it trembled, and I wordlessly turned my own hand over to hold his.

3

The owner and the manager came to the store at 9 a.m. to look at the now-empty glass case.

"W-We have to call the police first," the manager said, picking up the phone receiver.

"Wait, Takeshi." The owner held up his hand to stop him and stared at Holmes.

Holmes returned his stare without saying anything.

"Did the corrupt priest do that to you?" the owner asked quietly, referring to Holmes's wounds.

"Yes." Holmes nodded.

"Did you give him an eye for an eye?"

Holmes paused before shaking his head. "No."

"What the hell, you half-wit?! You let him walk all over you!" the owner yelled, loud enough that even people outside the store might've heard.

I flinched, but Holmes was unperturbed. "I did." He nodded.

"What're you gonna do about this?! Let him win?!"

"No, Ensho will take action against me, without a doubt. I swear I'll reclaim the Shino tea bowl."

"All right, well until you get it back, you're not allowed to step foot inside the Yagashira estate. Since you couldn't protect our ancestors' treasure, you have no right to enter the premises. Got it? Until you get it back, you're expelled."

I clenched my fists in anguish. "*No right"? But he fought so bravely...*" I almost spoke up without thinking, but I quickly closed my mouth. The owner's eyes were bloodshot and his fists were trembling. I could tell how frustrated he was, not just because the Shino tea bowl was stolen, but also because his grandson—his pride and joy—had been outmaneuvered. *Of course he'd be frustrated.*

"I understand," Holmes said, bowing deeply. "I made an unforgivable mistake and you have my heartfelt apologies. I swear I will atone for this failure." He didn't make a single excuse.

The owner nodded. "This is a tricky opponent for you. It'll be like fighting your mirror image, so be careful."

"I will."

"Takeshi, as you can see, this is an internal problem. Don't tell the police. It'd just bring shame to the family." The owner turned on his heel and left.

The store fell silent.

The manager listlessly hung his head in his hands. "I'm so sorry, Kiyotaka. This happened because I fell for their trick..."

"No, you did nothing wrong. They're the ones who did it in the first place, and this only happened because of my conflict with Ensho. I should be the one apologizing for getting you involved," Holmes said, patting the manager on the back.

"Kiyotaka..."

"You didn't get any sleep last night because you were worrying about me, right? Please go home and rest."

"That goes for you too, Kiyotaka."

"I'm still young, so I'm fine. Besides, I have much I'd like to think about," Holmes said quietly.

The manager nodded, realizing what Holmes was getting at. "Right, sorry. I'll be taking my leave then. We can close the store for today, since your face is in bad shape. You look pale too." He left the store.

It was just me and Holmes left now. The silence was stifling.

“You’ve been up all night too, Aoi. Please go home and rest.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m young too,” I said, repeating Holmes’s excuse.

“Oh, but if you don’t want me here, I’ll go,” I added hastily.

His expression relaxed. “Thank you, Aoi.”

“Huh?”

“You really saved me by coming here this morning.”

“Holmes...”

“It feels like you’re always helping me.”

“N-No, I should be the one saying that.”

“Aoi...” He reached his hand towards me but was interrupted by the fax machine beeping. My heart leapt.

Holmes picked up the sheet of fax paper and smiled. “I knew it.”

“Who’s that from, Holmes?”

“It was sent from a convenience store,” he said, showing me the fax.

Holmes of Kyoto,

I’m borrowing the Yagashira treasure.

Find me at my location.

It was written with a brush in incredibly artistic handwriting. There were ink paintings around the message: cherry blossoms and a tree branch with a silhouette of a small bird on it, possibly a sparrow.

“This is from Ensho, right?” I asked.

“Yes. As usual, his work is splendid, but there’s a hint of chaos in the painting and words. I imagine he wrote this today instead of preparing it in advance.”

Holmes put his hand on his chin as he looked at the fax. “Where is Ensho telling me to go?”

He silently continued to stare at the message. “‘My location,’ he says...” he murmured quietly, furrowing his brow.



After Aoi left, Kiyotaka remained in the store, mulling over the message. There was no jazz music playing today. The only noise was the ticking of the grandfather clock.

There should be a clue in this message. He folded his arms.

“Holmes of Kyoto,

I’m borrowing the Yagashira treasure.

Find me at my location.”

Cherry blossoms, ink paintings, a small bird without any defining features. It could be a tree sparrow or a Java sparrow. Where are these cherry blossoms? And if he painted them in such a detailed way, then why

is the bird only a silhouette? Do these paintings represent a location or a sentiment?

"It'd be a location," Kiyotaka murmured, looking up at the ceiling. *There's nothing related to cherry blossoms that links him to me. We first met in autumn, at Nanzen-ji Temple. The second time we met was also in autumn, at Genko-an Temple. Then we met on New Year's Eve at the Yagashira estate in Higashiyama, followed by last month at the Saito estate in Takagamine...*

I need to search his heart, the way he did when he cracked the password. Although to be honest, I'm not inclined to try to be like him. He leaned back against the chair. It's often said that when you gaze into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you. Touching the abyss can get you dragged into its depths.

Kiyotaka rested his chin in his hands and thought back to their previous conversations. *At Nanzen-ji Temple, that man had said, "When I found out that you saw through one of my counterfeits—that you were younger than me and smart enough to be nicknamed 'Holmes,' I wanted to challenge you."*

Then at Arashiyama, he placed a forgery of Strayed Sheep at the Yanagihara estate to lead me to Genko-an Temple. You could say that Ensho likes using riddles to lead people to places. At the temple, he thrust my folding fan at my throat, glared at me, and said, "It became clear that I really can't stand you." The reason for which was revealed last night, when he said, "How would a spoiled kid at the top of the pyramid know anything?"

"Which means the location is at the 'bottom of the pyramid.'" Where is that? Can I think of Teramachi-Sanjo as the top of the pyramid? No, that's not right. Kiyotaka shook his head, took out a map of Kyoto, and spread it out on the counter. He marked the following locations: Nanzen-ji Temple in Higashiyama (where they'd first met), Tenryu-ji Temple in Arashiyama (the closest temple to the Yanagihara estate where Ensho had challenged him), Genko-an Temple, Takagamine (where the Saito estate was), and the Yagashira estate which was near Ginkaku-ji Temple. When he connected the locations with lines, they formed a crooked trapezoid. Depending on how you look at it, it could be a quadrangular pyramid. I'll emphasize those lines—yes, it is indeed a pyramid, albeit crooked. In which case, the bottom of it is...

"I see, that makes sense." The cherry blossoms are in full bloom there, and this bird isn't a tree sparrow or a Java sparrow—it's a nightingale. He made it a silhouette on purpose, because it would've been too easy to guess the location if I'd known it was a nightingale from the start. He didn't want me to figure it out, but at the same time, he did. It's similar to how he creates his counterfeits.

"Anyway..." Now I know where he is. Kiyotaka placed the fax paper

on the counter and opened his laptop. As he typed away, the door chime rang. He looked up, surprised. "Akihito...?" His eyes widened. Standing at the door was Akihito Kajiwaru, peering inside at him.

"H-Hey, Holmes."

"Sorry, we're closed today. I'm also busy with something."

Kiyotaka stood up and gave Akihito an apologetic look.

"Oh... W-Well, I guess you would be."

"Huh?"

"Man, I thought you were gonna be depressed, but you seem fine. That's a relief." Akihito nodded.

Kiyotaka frowned. "Did someone tell you something?"

"Uh, he told me not to tell you it was him, but a certain old man called me and said, 'Kiyotaka's real depressed, so go cheer him up if you can.'"

Kiyotaka wordlessly facepalmed.

"I asked what happened, and he said, 'Explaining's too much work, so go ask Aoi.' So I called Aoi and asked."

"And you came all the way here just because of that?"

"Yep, that I did. Well, I was in Osaka so it wasn't too bad. So did you figure out the location in Ensho's fax?" Akihito entered the store and sat down across from Kiyotaka without hesitation.

"She really told you everything, I see."

"Yeah, I told her the owner gave her permission to tell me. Wait, crap, I just said who it was." Akihito hurriedly covered his mouth.

"Good grief," Kiyotaka said, shrugging and relaxing his expression. "I understand now. Thank you for your concern. I suppose I'll make coffee first."

"Cool. I bought kouign-amann cakes from an underground shop in Umeda. Let's eat 'em together."

"Sure. That's awfully thoughtful coming from you."

"What do you mean by that?!" Akihito crossed his arms unhappily.

Kiyotaka went into the kitchenette. *Come to think of it, I haven't eaten or drunk anything today besides water. Not even coffee.* He smiled at his sudden craving for coffee.

Upon his return, Kiyotaka placed the coffee cups on the counter and turned on the jazz music. He and Akihito both looked down at the fax paper while eating the kouign-amanns.

"Oh, so he's telling you to go to him," Akihito said, his mouth full of cake. "And you've figured out the place, right?" He glanced at Kiyotaka.

"Yes."

"Now that's our Holmes. So where is it?"

"Here," Kiyotaka said, pointing at a location on the map he'd been

using.

“Ooh.” Akihito looked up from the map. “When are you going?”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll come too,” Akihito said immediately.

Kiyotaka blatantly frowned.

“I’m sure Aoi wants to go too,” Akihito continued. “You always go out of control when you’re with Ensho. She must be really worried.”

“I’m...aware of that.” Kiyotaka sipped his coffee with a bitter look on his face.

“C’mon, let’s all go together. If it seems like we’ll get in the way, I’ll get Aoi out of there. You might think you’ve been battling Ensho by yourself all this time, but Aoi and I have been watching you too. Let us witness this,” Akihito said, looking straight at Kiyotaka.

Kiyotaka sighed and cracked a smile, having resigned himself. “I shouldn’t be the target of Ensho’s envy,” he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent.

“Huh?”

“I’m just saying that in the end, you’re the most enviable person of them all.”

“Wha? Is that sarcasm?” Akihito frowned dubiously, resting his chin in his hands.

“No, not at all. Back to what we were saying... Let’s go together then. Please take care of Aoi if something happens.”

“Yep, leave it to me. She’s important to you, so I’ll make sure to protect her.”

Kiyotaka gave a sad smile. “Thank you,” he said, bowing.

4

The next day, I got on the Karasuma subway line at Kuramaguchi Station. I was nervous—but happy that Holmes had invited me along. At Karasuma Oike Station, I transferred onto the Tozai Line towards Uzumasa Tenjingawa. I got off at the closest stop and walked to my destination: Higashi Ote Gate, a huge two-tiered gate with a lookout. That was our meeting spot.

Holmes and Akihito were already in front of the gate, so I quickly jogged up to them.

“Holmes, Akihito,” I called out.

They smiled and waved.

“Hello, Aoi.”

“Hey, Aoi.”

Akihito being cheerful was nothing new, but it was a relief to see Holmes looking happy again. Yesterday’s tension was gone. My eyes felt like they were going to tear up from joy. *This must’ve been the work*

of Akihito. He can easily make Holmes lighten up, even if it's not on purpose. I felt a bit frustrated that I couldn't do the same, but my feelings of gratitude were stronger.

"So this is the place your enemy meant, Holmes?" Akihito asked, turning around.

"Yes," Holmes replied. "The irony of the bottom of the pyramid being *here* is actually quite like him."

"Yeah..." I said. "I can't believe it's the castle."

The place in Ensho's riddle was Nijo Castle.

"Haven't been here since elementary school," Akihito said, stretching.

I nodded. "I came here for a field trip in middle school. It's famous for the nightingale floors that make chirping sounds, right?"

"Correct. Ieyasu Tokugawa had Nijo Castle built to protect the Imperial Court. It was also where he stayed when he was in Kyoto. The highlight is Ninomaru Palace—one of Japan's National Treasures—which was built in the traditional samurai style of the Momoyama period. Its reception hall was where Yoshinobu Tokugawa declared that power would be returned to the Imperial Court. The 'nightingale floors' you mentioned are another important feature. As well as..."

We passed through the gate. Upon entering the grounds, we were greeted by the sight of magnificent cherry blossom trees.

"Wow!" Akihito and I exclaimed, our eyes lighting up.

"Nijo Castle is also famous for its cherry trees," Holmes continued, "although it's already the end of the cherry blossom season here."

"They're still amazing, man. That's a castle for you."

We looked up at the cherry blossoms as we walked towards the Kara Gate that led to Ninomaru Palace. The solemn, beautiful gate reminded me of Nikko Toshogu, one of the many shrines dedicated to Ieyasu Tokugawa. *Maybe the Tokugawa family liked this kind of atmosphere*, I thought as I passed under the gate adorned with gold plates. Now that Ninomaru Palace was right in front of us, I felt even more nervous knowing that Ensho could be waiting inside.

As Holmes had explained, Ninomaru Palace truly looked like a samurai residence. We entered through what was called the "carriage porch" and took our time looking around. I admired the coffered ceiling and the painting of Tan'yu Kano on a sliding screen. When we reached the hall where the declaration of the restoration of imperial rule took place, I sensed its profound history and instinctively straightened my back.

"Dang, it really feels like we're experiencing history," Akihito murmured. I nodded in agreement.

When we walked in the corridors, the floor squeaked, making us smile.

“Hey, this was an anti-ninja strategy, right?” Akihito asked.

“Yes,” Holmes answered. “However, some say that it wasn’t intentional. Besides, the ninjas back then didn’t care. Apparently they could still walk on the nightingale floors without making any noise.”

“Really? Ninjas are amazing, huh?”

Holmes chuckled, but then his face fell. Perhaps the word “ninja” reminded him of Ensho. “He doesn’t seem to be here,” he said in a low voice.

Akihito’s eyes widened. “You mean this is the wrong place? Or it’s the wrong time?”

“I thought it’d be eighteen seconds past 1:31 p.m., but...”

“The heck? That’s so specific.”

“Indeed, it is.”

“Well, nothing we can do if he’s not here. Anyway, it looks like they’re doing a ‘Flower and Calligraphy Exhibit’ in the courtyard.” Akihito showed Holmes the flyer he’d received at the entrance. “Let’s check it out while we’re here.” Casually, he started walking.

Holmes and I looked at each other and laughed at Akihito’s usual carefreeness. We followed him to the courtyard, where white partitions and tables were lined up under the blooming cherry trees. There were spring flower arrangements on the tables and calligraphy on the partitions. Many of the poems were associated with spring.

I stopped in front of a magnificent verse that hung above a beautiful cherry blossom arrangement.

“Spring haze lingering o’er the mountain cherry blossoms, a sight I never tire of, as with you.”

“Is something the matter?” Holmes asked.

“No, I just thought it was lovely.”

“Indeed. This poem is by Ki no Tomonori. It means, ‘Like the cherry blossoms on the mountain under the springtime haze, I never tire of looking at you,’” he whispered.

I suddenly blushed and looked at the next one.

“Let me die in spring, under the flowers, during the full moon of the second month.”

I smiled in nostalgia at Saigyō Hoshi’s poem.

“Man, it’s all so elegant, huh?” murmured Akihito, folding his hands behind his head. There was nothing elegant about his posture and speech, but I could tell that he was appreciating the beauty. It was quite an impressive exhibit with over eighty items on display.

Holmes stopped upon seeing a certain piece of calligraphy. The arrangement accompanying it consisted solely of green leaves. The simplicity seemed rather abrupt, but it was still beautiful in a calm, refreshing way.

The calligraphy said: *“Glistening dew clinging to every blade of*

grass.”

“This must be it.” Holmes took a step closer and nodded.

“What?” Akihito asked.

“It’s a message from Ensho,” Holmes said quietly, narrowing his eyes.

“D-Did Ensho write this?” I asked.

“Yes, he did. Sneaking into an ordinary exhibition would be an easy task for that man. Also, starting from the entrance, this is the sixty-second item.”

For the record, the display items weren’t numbered.

“What’s special about sixty-two?” Akihito tilted his head, looking completely oblivious. I was the same.

“It’s simple. The three lines in that fax had thirteen, thirty-one, and eighteen letters, for a total of sixty-two. At first I thought it was indicating a time, but now I see that it was a display item. Or no, perhaps it was both.” Holmes looked at the calligraphy. “With this, Ensho has indicated a new location. He should be there this time. And I will go alone,” Holmes said, a determined look in his eye.

I didn’t know what to say.

“Wh-What can you tell from this?” Akihito asked. “What place is it showing?”

“This is another of Saigyō Hoshi’s poems.”

“Saigyō Hoshi?”

“Yes. *Who can remain in this world? We are glistening dew clinging to every blade of grass in Adashi Moor,*” Holmes recited quietly. He turned to us and bowed. “I’ll be going now.”

“Holmes...” I bowed back and watched him turn on his heel and walk away without a hint of hesitation in his gait. I shivered. *What if this time, I won’t be able to see him again?* Even though I knew it couldn’t possibly happen, I still had a bad feeling about this.

Without thinking, I ran up to Holmes’s receding figure. “Holmes!” I grabbed his hand and he turned around in surprise. “I’ll be waiting at Kura! No matter how long it takes, I’ll be waiting!”

“I have today off, so I’ll wait with her!” Akihito shouted.

Holmes frowned and put his hands on his hips. “You don’t need to stay in the store alone together for so long.”

“But the manager’s there too!” Akihito said immediately.

“Ah.” Holmes nodded. “All right. I promise I’ll return safely, so please wait for me.” He smiled brightly.

I felt a prickle in my nose and held back my tears. It felt like if I let myself cry, that “bad feeling” would come true...

I watched Holmes as he left, praying that he would be safe.



“Who can remain in this world? We are glistening dew clinging to every blade of grass in Adashi Moor.”

Can anyone remain in this world? No. Everyone dies eventually. We are all fleeting presences, like the glistening dew clinging to each blade of grass in Adashi Moor. That is what Saigyô Hoshi wrote of Adashi Moor.

In *Tsurezuregusa*, Kenkô Yoshida wrote, “The dew upon Adashi Moor never fades, nor does the smoke on Mount Toribe ever disperse; if we too were eternal, why, there would be no pathos. The world is remarkable because there is no certainty.” The dew in Adashi Moor and the smoke in Mount Toribe don’t disappear, but if it was customary for humans to live in this world forever too, then that would mean having no emotions. The transiency of this world is what makes it wonderful.

In Buddhism, Adashi Moor represents transiency and emptiness. It’s said that the name symbolizes the transformation from life to death, followed by reincarnation or moving to the pure land of Amitabha.

Adashi Moor immediately brings to mind the Nenbutsu-ji temple in Sagano. It was once a burial ground, and after Kukai’s weather-beaten remains were buried, people began to hold memorial services for him there. The temple is packed with approximately eight thousand stone statuettes and monuments. It is the gravesite for all of the people who were buried in Adashi Moor.

After leaving Nijo Castle by himself, Kiyotaka drove towards Sagano. Even though it was a weekday, it was still spring break, and cherry blossom season at that. The whole city of Kyoto was bustling. However, Adashi Moor was very quiet. Since that Nenbutsu-ji temple packed with stone statues was known for being a former burial ground, its history brought about frightening rumors that kept the fun-seeking tourists away.

Upon reaching Adashi Moor, Kiyotaka parked the car and walked down the quiet temple road. The small path was lined with various gift shops. There were accessories made of bamboo and a Daruma doll with eyebrow hair so long that it reached the table below, covering the doll’s eyes. A rickshaw stood to the side, seeming to have been abandoned. The only noise was the rattling of pinwheels spinning in the wind. The moor was shrouded in a mysterious, otherworldly atmosphere.

Kiyotaka climbed the stone steps leading to the temple. He passed through the gate and was greeted by vivid, beautiful cherry blossoms. The weeping cherry trees in front of the belfry were like guides, bowing their heads to welcome visitors. With them was a sea of stone statuettes and monuments which was called the Western Riverbed, a

reference to Buddhism's Riverbed of Death. It was also known as "the far end of the earth," making you wonder if this scenery extended into the "other world."

A priest wearing an ink-black kimono stood in the center of it all, looking at the trees swaying in the wind. If anyone else saw him, they would certainly believe that he was a priest at this temple. Even though he wasn't a real priest, he blended in perfectly with the surroundings.

Kiyotaka stepped into the Western Riverbed. The "priest"—that is, Ensho—looked at him, smiled, and bowed. "Hello, Mr. Holmes. I see you've found me. You really are something, eh?"

"You say that, but you knew I'd come, right?" Kiyotaka kept walking and stopped about five steps away from Ensho.

"Why yes."

"Why did you call me to Adashi Moor?"

"Well... I like this place. This temple keeps people away. There's a rumor that if you come here for fun, terrible things will happen to you. It's the far end of the earth where it feels like the netherworld."

"I see. It's just like you." Kiyotaka chuckled.

Ensho didn't seem bothered by that response.

"However," Holmes continued, "I don't think of this as a place that keeps people away." He looked at the countless stone statues.

Ensho narrowed his eyes, not saying anything.

"It's modest, but the cherry blossoms are so beautiful. Also, this land is exceptionally stunning in autumn. Cherry trees bloom for the sake of their own lives, and humans are fascinated by that. But autumn leaves are different. They change color before dying. For what purpose do they do that? Unlike cherry blossoms and flowers, it's not for the sake of their lives. People are simply fascinated by seeing them before they disappear. When I visited this temple in autumn, I felt that this was a very lonely place. Of course, I wouldn't want inconsiderate people to come here. But I felt that this place wanted visitors who would respect it and sympathize with the souls that rest here. It seems to reject people, but it's actually seeking them out. A sad, yet beautiful temple," Holmes said quietly, gazing at the Western Riverbed.

Ensho's eyes widened. "What, are you saying I'm the same?"

"It's up to you how you want to interpret it, but if you say that, then it's true, right?"

Ensho clenched his trembling fists and clicked his tongue. "I really can't stand you. You always talk too much."

"Yes, I agree. Even I don't think I need to say all of this. I can lie to myself when it comes to most people, but not you." *I can't control myself, and I end up saying things that rile me up. There's only one other person who does this to me...* Kiyotaka imagined the "other person" and

secretly smiled. He felt his irritation subside and tried to calm his breathing as much as possible. "Now, could you return the tea bowl?"

Ensho took a small slip of paper out of his sleeve and handed it to Kiyotaka.

Kiyotaka unfolded it and saw a simple hand-drawn map. It indicated a building that was within walking distance.

"That's my atelier," Ensho said. "Go get your spoils of victory."

"You're going to make me walk even more?"

"What's the big deal? Just go before I change my mind."

"All right, I will." Kiyotaka turned around and left the Western Riverbed.

Ensho stood in the middle of the statues, looking slightly amused as he waved goodbye. Once Kiyotaka was out of sight, a twisted grin appeared on his face.

Kiyotaka left the temple grounds and continued walking. He followed the map along a road lined with old houses to a mountain path. The trees rustled loudly in the strong winds.

He arrived at a small two-story apartment building with light brown outer walls. It was an old building with an outside staircase.

There was no room number written on Ensho's note. Kiyotaka stared at the rusty, weed-ridden stairs. They were so neglected that it made you wonder if anyone lived there.

When he approached the building, a voice said, "Hello." A woman with very short hair stepped out from behind it. She was wearing a light trench coat, a white blouse, a short black skirt, and black stockings. The beautiful woman in her mid-twenties had a confident look in her eyes.

"Hello... Are you the editor who visited my father by any chance?" Holmes asked, smiling.

The woman blinked. "Now that's a surprise. How did you know?"

"You don't look like you live in this building, and you were waiting for my arrival. Therefore, you must be that man's cohort."

"We're not *cohorts*. We just work together sometimes when necessary."

"Bad work, right?" Kiyotaka smiled.

The woman shrugged. "That's not a very nice smile. There's a lot of bad money and art in this world that can't be made public. All I do is borrow it."

"I don't care what your excuse is. It has nothing to do with me." Kiyotaka turned away.

The woman grabbed him by his shirt. "I have the key. Take it."

Kiyotaka silently turned around.

The woman slowly lifted her short skirt, revealing black garters. "The key is on my thigh...inside my stocking. Will you take it?" she

asked bashfully, blushing.

Kiyotaka tilted his head. "Are you all right with me taking it?"

"Yes, please do."

"Okay." Without hesitation, Kiyotaka lifted her leg by the ankle and retrieved the key that was sandwiched between her stocking and inner thigh. It had "205" written on it in permanent marker. "Thank you for the key. I'll be going now."

"I thought you were an inexperienced kid, but you didn't show any emotion. That's not cute at all. Shouldn't someone named Holmes have a soft spot for women?" The woman crossed her arms, looking genuinely annoyed.

Kiyotaka chuckled. "I do, but only for the woman I love." He placed his hand on his chest and smiled.

"Tch!" The woman blushed.

Kiyotaka climbed the rusty stairs. As the clanging sounds rang out, the woman shouted from below, "Hey, I love hot guys, so I'll do you a big favor and give you some advice."

He silently looked down at her.

"Don't be too stubborn," she said.

"Stubborn?" he murmured. He realized from her eyes that she was completely serious, so he nodded.

"Good," she said, sighing in relief. "Bye, then." She left quickly. It almost seemed as if she was running away.

Kiyotaka inserted the key into the doorknob and turned. It unlocked with a *click*. He opened the door warily and was immediately surrounded by the smell of paint and canvas. He squinted. It was a bit musty, but he didn't dislike the smell of paint.

The light-blocking curtains were left partially open. The setting sun shone in through the gap, illuminating the room. Palettes, paints, and brushes were strewn all over the floor. Faded canvases were propped up along the walls. Paintings that looked like they were from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries were scattered on the ground. Judging from how they were treated, they were probably bought from overseas so that the paint could be scraped off.

The atelier hadn't been used in quite some time. Kiyotaka entered, making sure not to step on any of the paint. Suddenly, the landline phone rang. He ignored it.

After ringing for some time, it switched to voice mail. "*Mr. Holmes, it's me. Could ya pick up the phone?*"

Kiyotaka frowned and picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"*Welcome to my atelier. The tea bowl's in the back, behind the curtain.*"

Kiyotaka silently opened the curtain and his eyes widened. The Shino tea bowl was inside an acrylic case on top of a low table. He

was relieved to see it, but at the same time, he grimaced at the multiple locks on the case. Right behind the case was an old-fashioned computer monitor. There was a keyboard in front.

“What’s with these locks?” he asked.

“You need a password to unlock them.”

Kiyotaka lightly clicked his tongue. *How irritating.*

“I copied what you did. This one’s sixteen letters, though. Time limit’s fifteen minutes. Since you’re so smart, you only get one shot. Starting in ten seconds.”

A countdown appeared on the screen. 10, 9, 8, 7...

“And if I don’t solve it in time?”

“Well, it explodes.”

The word “START” came up on the screen, along with a timer starting at 14:59.

“It explodes?” Kiyotaka furrowed his brow.

“There’s a bomb in that old computer. I wanted to do that red wire, blue wire thing you see in the movies, but they said it wasn’t possible.” Ensho laughed.

Kiyotaka’s face stiffened. “That joke isn’t funny...”

“I ain’t joking.”

“You would kill someone over something like this?”

“What? You can just run away. It ain’t gonna blow up the whole room, just the tea bowl. If you’re scared, just get away from it a minute before.” He snickered.

Kiyotaka recalled how serious the woman looked when she said, “Don’t be too stubborn.” He facepalmed and said, “There’s seriously something wrong with your head.”

“Time’s ticking! Get to it. Let me hear a nice sound, Mr. Holmes.”

Kiyotaka said nothing. He put the phone on speaker, placed it on the table, and sat down, looking at the keyboard. *If he copied me, then he must’ve chosen the password the same way I did.*

Sixteen letters.

“Oh, you know how I said you only get one shot? It explodes a minute after you get it wrong. You’d better run fast.”

“Only one chance? That’s rather strict.” Kiyotaka smiled.

“Why of course! It’s you, after all. Well, I guess it is pretty strict. I’ll give you a hint. No numbers, only uppercase English letters. When you’re done, hit enter. As long as you don’t hit enter, you can press as many keys as you want.”

“Only English letters... Is it an English word or a transliterated Japanese one?”

“Now that I won’t say. See ya!” he said, stressing the last words in a mockingly childish tone.

Kiyotaka clicked his tongue. *I never want to see you again.*

Today is April 10th. If he's using the same method I used, then that means the tenth poem in Hyakunin Isshu.

'Tis the place—going or coming, parting ways, knowing or not knowing, all are Osaka no Seki, by Semimaru. “According to the rumors, people who leave Kyoto, people who return, acquaintances, and strangers alike all part ways and meet here, at Osaka no Seki.” Osaka no Seki was a checkpoint at the border between Yamashiro Province and Omi Province. Omi Province is now Shiga Prefecture, and Yamashiro Province is now the city of Kyoto.

Is the password made from its latitude and longitude? Or is it from Shonagon Sei, who also wrote a poem about Osaka no Seki?

As he contemplated, an indescribable sense of discomfort welled up in his chest. “No, that’s not it.” He shook his head. *Even if he said he copied me, he wouldn’t do it to this extent. It’s probably not a poem.*

Think.

What kind of password would Ensho come up with?

He glanced at the display. It said 10:09. Only ten minutes left.

He probably just meant that it was based off of the date. I don’t think he’d want to copy the rest. Kiyotaka crossed his arms.

An amused laugh came from the receiver. *“There’s a camera, so this is great. That’s a nice face you’re putting on.”*

“You really are rotten.” Kiyotaka sighed and ran his hand through his forelocks.

Ensho said he was at “the bottom of the pyramid” and used that to indicate a location. Maybe he did the same thing this time and the clue is in his words. What words did Ensho throw my way?

He pondered.

Come to think of it, there was one phrase that felt a bit unnatural: “Let me hear a nice sound, Mr. Holmes.” What did that mean? I originally assumed he meant an explosion, but that might not be the case. For now, I should think about what happened on April 10th... Louis III became king of West Francia. The Titanic set sail. Prince Akihito married Michiko... Ugh, that’s all I can think of.

He reluctantly decided to give up and look on the internet. As he was about to take his phone out, he stopped. “Oh...” *That’s right, April 10th was the day that the bell was completed for the United Kingdom’s parliament building. It was named Big Ben after Sir Benjamin Hall, who oversaw its installation.*

The “nice sound” was referring to Big Ben’s chime, then. It rings every day at noon. In Japan, the sound is often used for school bells. We call it the “Westminster Chime.”

In which case, the sixteen letters are “WESTMINSTERCHIME.”

Kiyotaka typed in the letters and was about to hit enter, but stopped. *No, there’s no way this is enough. He wouldn’t make it that*

straightforward. He looked at the timer which now said 01:29.

"I think you'd better get running."

"No, I won't run." Sweat dripped down his forehead.

"Don't be stubborn, or you really will die."

"Please be quiet."

"No regrets, eh?"

"I have plenty."

There were a lot of things he'd regret if he died now. But the biggest one was...

"I will not die here, not while I haven't told her what I need to," he snapped.

Ensho burst out laughing. *"Oh, to be young again. I like how you are right now."*

"Well, I hate it."

If he entered the wrong password, the computer would explode after one minute. If he ran immediately, his life would be spared but the tea bowl would be destroyed.

This isn't my field of expertise. The first letter could be "C" or "F." It could even be "E."

The display said 00:59.

Only one minute left. I have to enter something. Forget about the correct answer—what would Ensho choose?

Suddenly, Kiyotaka recalled Ensho's "See ya!" Holding his breath, he typed: "CEDGGDECECDGGDEC." The instant he slammed the enter key, there was a loud explosion sound.

5

I can't calm down. I sat on a chair at Kura, constantly looking at the grandfather clock. Its ticking hands had already passed 6 p.m.

"Hey, Aoi, you seem pretty restless," Akihito said. "Calm down." He was wandering aimlessly around the store, seemingly not able to sit still. The manager had been with us for a while, but he couldn't seem to relax either. He went out for a walk to "get some fresh air."

"Y-You should calm down too, Akihito."

"I... Yeah, you're right. I wonder if he's okay." He plopped himself down on a chair as if he'd been playing musical chairs and the music had suddenly stopped.

"He's fine," I whispered, mainly to myself.

"Yeah. He is. He'll be back soon. I'm gonna wait outside for him." *He really can't sit still.*

Akihito quickly stood up and left. Now there was no one but me. The grandfather clock's ticking echoed through the store. Since we were closed today, the music wasn't playing.

I propped my elbows up on the counter, folded my hands together, and closed my eyes tightly. *It'll be okay*, I thought, but I couldn't shake my fears. I felt like I was suffocating. *Where did Ensho summon him to? What is he trying to do? It shouldn't be something extreme. It shouldn't be, but Ensho is fully capable of doing the extreme.*

I have a bad feeling about this.

At the Saito residence, there was clear enmity in Ensho's eyes—I sensed that his attitude towards Holmes had transformed into genuine hatred. *But even then, why did he do something so drastic? Before, all he did was challenge Holmes with his counterfeits. Does he want to outwit Holmes no matter what it takes? Or has his hatred grown to the point where he doesn't care about appearances anymore?*

What if something happens to Holmes...? My heart pounded furiously. Feeling my fingertips growing numb with cold, I clenched my fists.

The door chime rang. *Akihito and the manager must be back.* I turned around and my eyes widened.

"Holmes...?" I trembled.

"I'm back, Aoi." Holmes smiled as if he'd just returned from a minor errand.

"I-I'm so glad you're safe." I quickly stood and ran up to him.

"I'm sorry for making you worry. As you can see, the tea bowl is safe too." He showed me the wooden box with the tea bowl inside and placed it on the counter.

"Th-That's good too, but I'm really glad that you didn't get hurt."

My eyes were blurry with tears. He seemed so unchanged that I wondered if I was only dreaming that he'd returned safe and sound.

"I-If something happened to you, I..." *What would I do? Up until now, I just thought I had a crush on him—which is true, but it's more than that. I realized just how important he was to me. Even if our feelings aren't mutual; even if he rejects me and I never see him again, as long as he's safe, that's enough for me. It might be a reckless way of thinking, but I realize now that even if you take away all of my feelings of romantic love, Holmes is still extremely important to me.* "I'm really, really glad."

"Yes, I'm fine. Although for a second I thought I was going to die." He slumped his shoulders.

"Wh-What? What happened?" I asked, quickly looking up.

"Don't worry, it really was fine. As you can see, both the tea bowl and I are safe. But for the first time in my life, my legs gave out." He smiled, slightly cheerfully.

"Your legs? Wh-What on earth happened?"

"Well, you see..." He put his hands on his hips.



Back at Ensho's hideout, the moment Kiyotaka typed the sixteen letters and hit enter, he heard an explosion. Immediately after, the screen displayed "Congratulations!" and a fireworks video. Then the *ding-dongs* of the Westminster Chime played. The locks opened with a clack.

"Congrats, Mr. Holmes. As you can see, it was 'CEDGGDECECDGGDEC,' the notes of the Westminster Chime. A job well done as usual."

Kiyotaka heaved a sigh and placed his hand on his forehead. "Just so I know, was there really a bomb?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Didn't think you'd be that stubborn, though."

"I don't know what you expected, but I've lived this far on stubbornness alone." Kiyotaka tried to stand up and grimaced.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Aw, your legs gave out from the explosion sound? Get some rest!" Ensho burst out laughing.

"I'm quite fine." Kiyotaka sighed again, stood up with the help of his arms, and retrieved the Shino tea bowl. It was back in his hands now. Upon seeing that it was unharmed, he felt sincerely relieved.

"You really are a stubborn one. I was hoping to see you cry and run away with your tail between your legs, but I guess that'd be too normal."

"I apologize for not meeting your expectations."

"Anyway, I bet you don't know why I did this, yeah?" he said self-deprecatingly.

"I know. Or rather, *now* I know."

Ensho laughed quietly on the other end of the phone. "Until next time, Mr. Holmes."

"I don't need a 'next time.' Farewell," Kiyotaka said coldly, taking the wooden box with the tea bowl outside with him.



"That's what happened." Holmes smiled cheerfully.

My eyes widened after hearing the full story. It was more than I could've ever imagined. "I-It was *that* dangerous?"

"It wasn't as dangerous as you think. I could've run away if I had to, and I don't even know if there was actually a bomb in the first place."

"But it felt like there was, right? That's why your legs gave out, right? I'm sure you knew there was one, even if you didn't know if it would actually explode!" I accused angrily.

"Perhaps." He gave a strained smile.

"I'm begging you, don't be so reckless. I was so, so worried. Not just me—Akihito and the manager were dying from anxiety as well,

and I'm sure the owner was too. I can't believe such a thing happened!" *What would've happened if he made a single mistake?* I trembled at the thought and started crying for a different reason than before.

Holmes looked down at me with sad eyes. "Forgive me, Aoi."

"Holmes..." Unable to contain my emotions, I gripped his shirt tightly. "H-Holmes, um..."

He looked at me without saying anything.

"Sorry, there's something I really have to say," I continued. My heart was beating a mile a minute. I was originally going to tell him after summer break, when I became a third-year. *But I can't wait anymore. I want to tell him now.* "I-I...um, I've always..." *Liked you.*

"Aoi," he said, interrupting me before I could finish. I stiffened up. "Please don't say the rest," he said flatly.

My heart was in anguish. "S-Sorry." I hurriedly bowed and stayed looking at the floor. *It was unwanted after all. I didn't expect him to accept my feelings anyway. I just really wanted to tell him. I didn't think he'd even stop me from doing that... I wish I could've at least said it.* My eyes flooded with tears.

"Aoi," Holmes said in a gentle tone.

When I looked up, he reached out.

"I love you," he said in his Kyoto accent.

Before I knew it, I was in his arms. He was hugging me tightly.

"Forgive me for making you go that far," he continued. "I should've been the one to say it. I love you, Aoi."

Not comprehending what was happening, I simply stood there, eyes wide, trembling in his arms. Bewildered, I looked up and our eyes met. His eyes, which were usually so calm and gentle, now burned with passion.

I felt dizzy. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Y-You're lying."

"I'm not lying," he said in a slightly irritated tone.

"But you said there was someone you wanted to be your girlfriend..."

Holmes paused. "That was *you*. I've had feelings for you for a long time now."

I stood there, stock-still. *I can't believe this.* Everything he'd said and done in the past was flashing before my eyes.

"What...? Since when?"

"To be honest, I'm not entirely sure myself. By the time I realized it, I'd already been in love with you," he said weakly.

I didn't know what to say.

"But it may have been the Gion Festival, although I wasn't aware

of it at all at the time.”

“The Gion Festival...?”

“Yes. That night when you left the store, there was a chance that you’d run into your ex and your former best friend, right?”

I clammed up. On the night of yoi-yoi-yama, my ex-boyfriend and best friend apologized to me in front of all of our friends. It felt like I was on a bed of nails. That was when Holmes came in dashing and saved me.

“When I thought that you might be crying, I couldn’t sit still. I wanted to protect you,” he said, looking straight at me. I felt dizzy again. “But as I said, I wasn’t aware of it at the time. It wasn’t until after the encounter with Ensho at Genko-an that I thought, ‘I might be in love with you.’ Akihito interrupted me before I could accidentally say it out loud, though, and I came back to my senses.”

I raised my hands to my mouth in surprise. Back then, Holmes had taken my hand and said, “Aoi, I...” Apparently he’d realized his feelings and was about to say, “I might be in love with you.” I honestly couldn’t believe it. But thinking back, what happened at the Gion Festival also happened at Shinkokan on Valentine’s Day and the gathering of appraisers at the Saito residence. *He always came to my rescue. He’s always been protecting me. Sometimes he nonchalantly steps forward, risking his own life...*

Warmth welled up in my chest and tears spilled down my face. Holmes took his handkerchief out of his pocket as usual and gently wiped my tears.

“I’m sorry for surprising you. I didn’t mean to confess my feelings for a while longer, but...”

“How come...?” I asked, my voice trembling.

Holmes made a troubled expression. “Because you’re still a seventeen-year-old high school student... When I realized how I felt, I decided to wait until you graduated. But the longer I was with you, the more I began to worry if it was all right to go so slowly. My own feelings had grown stronger too, after all. So I decided to at least wait until you turned eighteen. But today, when I was in a life-threatening situation, the first thing I thought was that I wished I could’ve confessed my feelings. And I resolved to do so once I got back...”

I couldn’t stop crying at his words.

He touched my shoulder and brought his face closer to mine. “I love you, Aoi...”

Between the relief that Holmes had returned safe and sound, the discovery that our feelings had been mutual all this time, and most of all, the fact that he was about to kiss me, my mind was in absolute chaos. Everything went silent—I could only hear my heartbeat reverberating through my body.

Just when he'd come close enough for our noses to touch, he sighed and straightened back up. "Unfortunately, we're being interrupted." He smiled wryly and slumped his shoulders.

"H-Huh?" Confused, I turned around just in time to hear the door chime.

"Kiyotaka!" The manager ran inside.

"Holmes, you're back?!"

"Kiyotaka's back?!"

Akihito and the owner followed suit.

So that's what he meant. Phew, that was close. I turned away to hide my beet-red face, secretly relieved.

"I'm sorry I made you worry." Holmes bowed deeply to everyone.

"Kiyotaka..." The owner looked Holmes up and down. Upon confirming that he wasn't injured, he smiled in relief—but quickly switched to a sharp glare and yelled, "So where's the tea bowl?! You got it back, right?"

"Yes, it's right here." Holmes pointed at the wooden box on the counter with his right hand.

"O-Oh," the owner murmured. He looked inside the box and broke out into a wide, happy grin. *He must be overjoyed that Holmes safely brought it back.*

"I truly am sorry." Holmes bowed again.

"You did well." The owner immediately turned around after saying those three short words and left the store.

"Wh-Wha? Why'd he leave?" Akihito asked, tilting his head in confusion.

I think I know why. The owner's eyes were moist with tears. Tears of relief, joy, and pride. He probably didn't want us to see them.

"I'm surprised you really did stay here the entire time, Akihito," Holmes said. "Since you weren't in the store, I thought you left already."

"What?! I was worried, you know?!"

"Yes, I know. Thank you. I appreciate what you did this time."

"O-Oh. It's kind of gross when you thank me honestly like that."

"Could you refrain from calling it gross?" Holmes said coldly. He looked at us as a group and said, "Aoi, Dad, Akihito, I'm sorry for the trouble I caused."

"It's fine," the manager said, smiling gently. "I'm glad you're safe."

"Yeah, just treat me to something next time!" Akihito shouted.

"Sure. I don't think it'll quite make up for it, but I'll treat you to dinner at Mishima Restaurant tonight," Holmes said, smiling and placing his hand on his chest.

"Sweet! That's an expensive sukiyaki and shabu-shabu place,

right? I'm starving!"

"C-Come to think of it, I am too," I said. I hadn't eaten properly since yesterday.

"No, Kiyotaka, I'll pay," said the manager.

"It's fine," Holmes said, laughing and opening the door. The bell chimed.

Upon confirming that everyone was outside, Holmes locked the door tightly. Akihito and the manager walked ahead of us.

"Um..." Holmes murmured softly.

"Yes?" I looked up at him.

"Could we...hold hands?" he asked, averting his eyes out of embarrassment.

A tingling sensation ran up and down my body. "Y-Yes, I don't mind." I nodded shyly, looking down at the ground.

"In that case..." He took my hand in his and held it firmly. Now it felt like all of the blood in my body was heating up. *This isn't even the first time we've held hands, though.*

I looked up at Holmes and he covered his mouth with his other hand. "Rats, I made a mistake," he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Why did I pick such a close restaurant when we're holding hands? I should've picked something farther away."

"H-Holmes..."

His pale skin had become noticeably flushed, making me blush harder as well. We stood next to each other, holding hands, rooted in place in front of Kura.

Akihito stopped walking and turned around, only to look extremely exasperated by what he saw. "What the heck are they doing?"

"Akihito, I'm probably more shocked than you are," the manager said. "I've never seen Kiyotaka like that before...but it's a relief that he is a normal child after all."

"A normal child? He's your own son, right?"

"Yes, of course. Well... Let's go to the restaurant first, Akihito."

"Yeah. Jeez, he was giving me that lecture about rationalizations and now he's blushing over holding hands? Is he an elementary schooler?"

"Rationalizations?"

"Uh, never mind. It's something between him and me."

Holmes and I watched Akihito and the manager from afar as they went into Mishima Restaurant, laughing to themselves. We awkwardly looked at each other.

"Aoi..."

"Yes?"

“I’ll be in your care,” he said, with a gentle yet firm look in his eyes.

“Yes, same here.” I bowed.

A refreshing breeze blew past us, carrying the scent of fresh leaves. *Today is the last day of spring break. Tomorrow, my new life begins.* My heart leapt at the thought of the wonderful days to come.

...I hadn’t yet realized it at the time. Holmes is quite an eccentric, and sometimes he’s wicked. He’s considerate, but he has a bit of a selfish side. On top of that, he’s blackhearted—definitely not straightforward at all. Joining hands with him was going to put my heart through a great deal of turmoil and get me caught up in all sorts of new cases—but that’s a story for later.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“Okay.”

Under the rose madder sky, I held his hand tighter and we started walking. On this special day, the two of us took a new step forward.

Afterword

On February 21st, 2016, I visited a certain hotel in Osaka. The entrance to the hall said “Japan Sherlock Holmes Club, Kansai Branch — 221st Assembly.” That’s right—since I presumptuously gave this series the title *Holmes of Kyoto*, a member of the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club (JSHC) reached out to me and invited me to their commemorative meeting.

One of the executive committee members was a lawyer who was formerly part of the mystery genre research society at Kyoto University. His name was O (Okawara was modeled after him), and he was the senior of the author Yukito Ayatsuji, who was also in attendance.

Many of the members had high-profile occupations—lawyers, professors, doctors—but they had youthful glints in their eyes, perhaps because they were Sherlockians. They were full of humor and mischief.

As explained in the book, 221 is a special number for Sherlockians. To them, it was a joyful miracle that they could hold their 221st assembly on February 21st. I listened to their stories about using 221 in their license plates and passwords, and their passionate love for *Holmes* had me itching to write a story about the meeting. Two months later, in April, I attended my second meeting and told them what I wanted to do. They readily gave permission, saying, “We’d be delighted! Just change the official name and whatnot, and you’re good to go.”

When I was writing about the 221st Assembly, I recruited members to be models for characters. The people who Sugiura, Azuma, Akashi, Nishizawa, Okawara, Sashihara, Matsuda, Makabe, the Uchiumi couple, and President Hiraoka were modeled from applied and filled out the survey I handed out, so I brought them into the story. (Madam is a fictional person, by the way.) The models checked my manuscript too, making me feel more nervous about my writing than I ever had been—but it was still enjoyable.

The characters’ occupations and anecdotes were mostly left as-is (even the story about the baby being born on February 22nd). I was very inspired by the generosity, open-mindedness, intelligence, humor, and playfulness of everyone at the Kansai JSHC. I’m sincerely grateful to them.

Thank you, everyone at the Kansai JSHC.

Additionally, in this volume I was graciously given the privilege of collaborating with the Kyoto Sanga FC. When the talks began, I thought, “Kiyotaka is good at kicking, but he doesn’t seem like he’d play soccer.” However, I was confident that he would love the local sports teams.

Before writing the short story for this collaboration, I visited Nishikyogoku Stadium in person and watched a game. Watching a home game is truly amazing—like Ms. Hayakawa in the story, I felt like I was going to get addicted to it.

Thank you, Kyoto Sanga FC.

Lastly, when you think of Nishikyogoku, you think of Ogawa Coffee. When volume 4 of this series was released, I was blessed with an opportunity to have lunch at Ogawa Coffee with the manager of a bookstore. It felt like a mixture of a traditional coffee house and a modern cafe. I was so impressed by the atmosphere and the delicious coffee and lunch that I asked if I could include them briefly in my humble work, and they said yes.

Thank you, Ogawa Coffee.

When I write it out like this, it feels like volume 5 was one big collaboration.

This volume takes place during spring break, one year after Aoi and Kiyotaka first met. Indeed, I think it was quite an eventful break. The two of them have finally taken a step forward, but more little incidents are sure to come their way. I hope you’ll watch over them warmly.

Once again, I offer my sincere gratitude to everyone involved with me and this book.

Thank you very much.

Mai Mochizuki



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by Mai Mochizuki

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